

Black Narcissus: The Role of the Suburban Othermother

by

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### **Dedication**

To my grandmothers, Marie Jarrell, Mother Virginia Doris Rogers Swanson, Dr. Lillian Delores McFadden, and the rest of the othermothers who have gone before me.

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### Abstract

In recent decades, suburban communities and public schools have become more integrated (Diarrassouba & Johnson, 2014; Frey, 2003; Irvine & Irvine, 2007; Logan, 2003), which one could interpret as a success linked to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. However, as suburban demographics change, African American students are still at an academic disadvantage, facing an achievement gap (Chapman, 2014; Irvine & Irvine, 2007; Kafele, 2009; Ogbu, 2003). As involuntary immigrants, African American students often feel alienated in school settings where they are the minority (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1990, 2003; Ogbu & Simons, 1998), and have a need to connect to the learning environment. One way to increase this connection is through hiring and retaining teachers of color, but through the years there has been a decline of African American educators entering the profession (Ingersoll & May, 2016; Irvine & Irvine, 2007). However, many Black female teachers who have been teaching a number of years are part of a phenomenon called “othermothering,” in which they care for children who are not blood relatives in a lovingly firm way (Case, 1997; Collins, 2000a, 2005, 2015; Foster, 1993; Guiffrida, 2005; James, 1993; Kakli, 2011; Lindsay-Dennis, Cummings, & McClendon, 2011; Loder, 2005; Wilson, 2010). Through qualitative methods, this study examined the role of Black female teachers identified as “othermothers” and their impact within suburban school settings.

*Keywords:* African American education; African American teachers; Black feminist care; Black feminist thought; ethic of care; othermothering; teachers; womanism

## Black Narcissus: The Role of the Suburban Othermother

### Preface

When I started my doctoral journey, I thought that I would do research about the schooling experiences of Black boys, as that is what I had been quite vocal about and even seen as an expert within my career in education. Somehow, as I matriculated through my program, I stumbled across Black feminism and othermothering, and latched on to it; I found something that finally validated my experience. As I wrote about the suburban othermother and her experience, I found this document growing into a labor of love, instead of being laborious. In Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, she describes one definition of womanism as "A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength" (Walker, 1983, pp. xi-xii). My dissertation is more than a standard research project; I found that over time it grew into a love letter to Black female educators. I came into this project as a Black feminist, and leaving, I find myself a burgeoning womanist. That being said, this dissertation places the views and lived experience of the Black female educator at the center. Black culture is the norm and standard around which everything else revolves. This dissertation is unapologetically Black; it is written by a Black woman, about Black women, and for Black women.

### Chapter 1: Introduction and Context

My quest for higher education as an undergraduate student led me to a private, conservative, Evangelical university in the heart of the western United States, where I found myself standing out as an African American woman. Coming from a major metropolitan area, where Black people were the majority in many parts, I was confronted with feelings of loneliness and homesickness. I gained solace in the stacks of the library, where I began reading literature related to African American studies, as a means to connect and receive comfort. It was during this time that I stumbled upon what has become one of my favorite poems, “Black Narcissus” by Gerald W. Barrax (1967), a piece about integration, assimilation, belonging, and self-love:

You want to integrate me into your anonymity  
because it is my right  
you think  
to be like you.

I want your right to be like yourself.

Integrate me for this reason:

because I will die with you.

But remember

each day I will look into a mirror

and if you have not taken more than you have given

I will laugh when I see that I am still black. (p. 203)

For a deeper understanding of this poem and why it is titled “Black Narcissus,” one must first revisit Greek mythology to learn the story of Narcissus. Narcissus was the son of Cephissus, a river god, and Liriope, a nymph. He was extremely beautiful, and a seer declared he would live a long life, as long as he never recognized himself. After rejecting the love of the nymph, Echo, the gods punished him. He stopped for a drink at a spring, fell in love with his image in the waters, and pined away in sorrow. He then turned into a flower, which is now a symbol for heartless beauty. This myth is also what led to the Freudian psychiatric term narcissism, an excessive degree of self-esteem or self-involvement (Narcissus, 2019a, 2019b). Connecting this poem to the African American experience, one could say that a Black person is the modern-day Narcissus, torn between two worlds, facing pressure to meet society’s standards or perish (physically, mentally, and/or emotionally), and persecuted for recognizing and loving the fullness of who he or she is.

From an educational standpoint, identity, silencing, and tapping into potential are issues that many African American students attending school and living in diverse suburban communities face, similar to both the myth of Narcissus and Barrax’s piece. The author’s choice to include Narcissus in the title of the poem and conclude with reflection holds great significance in regards to the self-identification of Black students, how they are viewed by others, and being marginalized in schools. Education demographics have changed since *Brown v. Board of Education*, but many African American students are still not being adequately reached by the public school system (Irvine & Irvine, 2007) as their needs are overlooked by mainstream curriculum and a majority-White teaching staff. Every day, there are students of color making sense of their identity in majority-White spaces, and many, like Barrax’s piece indicates, want to be accepted and included for who they are at the end of the day.

### **Context**

Over the past two decades, suburban communities have become more integrated, receiving an influx of minority populations, particularly African American (Denton & Gibbons, 2013; Frey, 2003; Logan, 2003). Teachers in these communities are often unprepared to instruct minority children and teach from a deficit model (Chapman, 2014; Irvine & Irvine, 2007; Ogbu, 2003). This in turn has led to an achievement gap between Black students and their White and Asian peers (Kafele, 2009; Ogbu, 2003). In examining how the problem has persisted, one must first review African American education trends through a historical lens, including a look at population trends.

### **Black Population Trends**

More often than not, African Americans and other minority groups are associated with populating urban city centers. Trends from past census data show that minorities are disproportionately residing in central cities, compared to the number of Whites residing in suburban areas. However, despite preconceived notions, there has been an increase of Black Americans and other minority groups migrating to suburban areas over the past few decades (Frey, 2003). Not only has there been an increase in Blacks rapidly moving to suburbs, but there has been an increase in suburban matriculation and residents across the nation (Logan, 2003). As populations of cities change, one can expect public schools to be impacted as well.

When interpreting the data, one must first understand what are considered suburbs and central cities. According to Denton and Gibbons (2013), “the U.S. Census Bureau [defines] the suburban population as those living inside metropolitan and micropolitan areas but outside their primary cities” (p. 18). Central cities are associated with “city size, density, and employment concentration that are uniformly applied across all metropolitan areas” (Frey, 2003, p. 156).

Historically, suburbs were inhabited by White middle-class families whose privilege allowed them to benefit from federally insured mortgages that people of color had difficulty obtaining, due to “demographic, social and policy forces that occurred from the mid-20th century to the mid-1990s” (Diarrassouba & Johnson, 2014, p. 2). As a result, for many years African Americans and other families did not reside in suburbs until housing policies and practices began to change.

According to the 2000 and 2010 Census data, racial and ethnic diversity in suburbs has substantially increased to the point where minorities comprise more than 25% of suburban populations. Minorities comprise the majority of “melting pot” suburbs in metro areas where there are high immigrant populations such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago (Frey, 2003). However, in the South and West, there has been a significant increase in African Americans residing in suburban areas (Denton & Gibbons, 2013; Frey, 2003). Overall, there has been a change in suburban racial minority composition, particularly with the growth of African Americans.

Diarrassouba and Johnson (2014) identify four major factors that have contributed to demographic shifts in suburbs. First, there has been a change in forces (demographic, social, and policy) that once kept minorities from entering suburban communities. Next, despite income, families of all economic statuses are seeking ways to provide their children with a quality education, by residing in suburbs. As more minority children and families enter suburbs, the majority of Whites in these communities are aging. Finally, minorities have flocked to suburbs in search of comfortable living spaces.

If this trend persists, then it will cause shifts to occur beyond the demographic level. Altering the makeup of a community has a large impact on those who reside, work, shop, and are



educated in that area. As new issues arise, one must decide whose voice will be heard the loudest (Logan, 2003) when it comes to decision-making around pedagogy, curriculum, and practice. Unfortunately, as suburbs become more heterogeneous in racial and ethnic makeup, the divide between Whites and minorities increases as well. African American students have become negatively impacted by school systems in these communities, a circumstance that emphasizes the need to examine African American education from a historical lens, and to take stock of the resulting achievement gap.

### **History of Black Education**

Before *Brown v. Board of Education* and desegregation efforts, schools were segregated through both *de jure* and *de facto* systems, in the South and North, respectively (St. John & Cadray, 2004). Desegregation included busing, redistricting, and the introduction of magnet schools (St. John & Cadray, 2004). However, as desegregation occurred in urban areas, “many financially comfortable Whites either moved to the suburbs or enrolled their children in private schools...This movement—the ‘great White flight’—reflects what Kohlberg would call a preconventional attitude toward the new laws” (St. John & Cadray, 2004, p. 95).

As wealthier individuals found ways to segregate themselves, despite laws and policies, inner-city schools became racially isolated (Collins, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; St. John & Cadray, 2004). When those with the financial means to move abandoned urban areas, not only were desegregation efforts diminished, but the gap widened between the “haves” and the “have-nots.”

Over 60 years since *Brown v. Board of Education*, American schools are still segregated, but through *de facto* systems (Collins, 2009; St. John & Cadray, 2004). Many schools that are primarily African American are in urban settings with low academic and school quality (Collins,

2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; St. John & Cadray, 2004). While African American students do not all come from poverty or low social status, many do, which also contributes to the achievement gap. Furthermore, educational policy such as No Child Left Behind does “more harm than good to some children in the inner city by limiting the holistic educational experiences to which they are being exposed via their curriculum” (Beachum, Dentith, Mccray, & Boyle, 2008, p. 191). Unfortunately, the achievement gap, socioeconomic gap, and loss of population attributed to higher poverty levels and fewer access to resources in urban educational settings only further a system of oppression, power, and privilege (Collins, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; St. John & Cadray, 2004). As a result, students of color become marginalized by this hegemonic system, and their needs go unaddressed within the realm of education.

Simultaneously, within the last three decades, demographic shifts have occurred in suburban school districts as families have moved from urban communities desiring better educational opportunities (Diarrassouba & Johnson, 2014). Latino, Asian, and Black populations have all increased in suburban areas (Diarrassouba & Johnson, 2014; Logan, 2003); nearly one-third of students of color in the United States attend majority-White suburban schools (Chapman, 2014). However, although suburban schools have become racially and ethnically diverse, institutional racism and inequitable practices still exist (Chapman, 2014; Ogbu, 2003). One research study showed that the longer a student of color remained in a predominantly White school, the larger the achievement gap became between them and their White peers (Chapman, 2014; Ogbu, 2003). Despite efforts for public schools to become places where students of all races can receive an equitable education, inequality still exists, producing long-term effects on the achievement and well-being of young people.

## **The Achievement Gap**

The achievement gap is a term used to describe academic disparities that persist between African American students and their White and Asian peers (Chapman, 2014; Irvine & Irvine, 2007; Kafele, 2009; Ogbu, 2003). Within this gap, Black students significantly fall behind students of other races, specifically in reading and mathematics by the time they are in 12th grade (Ogbu, 2003). In addition to this lagging behind in content areas, Ogbu (2003) reported that achievement gaps exist in proficiency test scores, SAT scores, course level enrollment, grade point averages, high school graduation rankings, and college attendance. The achievement gap will continue to widen as long as teachers hold low expectations, educational systems fail to recognize Black students as involuntary immigrants, and efforts are not made to recruit and retain African American teachers to the field.

**Low expectations.** Individual teacher attitudes and beliefs drive expectations and behavior. Studies have shown that schools and teachers with positive attitudes increase student achievement, while those with negative attitudes decrease student achievement and increase the achievement gap (Calabrese, Goodvin, & Niles, 2005; Crawford, 2007; Kafele, 2009; Payne, 1994; Solomon, Battistich, & Hom, 1996). Whether teachers are aware of it or not, students perceive teacher attitudes and expectations, and act accordingly (Kerman, 1979; Pringle, Lyons, & Booker, 2010). Beliefs and attitudes of teachers have the power to drive student achievement, which shows that education and pedagogy go deeper than textbook knowledge and curriculum training.

Furthermore, studies have shown that minority students, particularly African American students, are most impacted by teacher attitude compared to other races (McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Thompson, Warren, & Carter, 2004). Teachers hold a variety of negative attitudes when

educating African American students. A study conducted by Calabrese et al. (2005) identified attitudes of teachers working with minority populations that impacted student learning: “blaming and racism; bureaucratic rigidity; codependency; and inflexibility and frustration” (p. 441). These attitudes, particularly blaming, stem from deficit thinking, in which the educator focuses on the external obstacles hindering achievement instead of looking inward (Harris, 2012). These negative attitudes and beliefs create what educational psychologists refer to as the “self-fulfilling prophecy,” in which students live up to the expectations set for them by teachers (Brophy & Good, 1970; Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Teachers need to be aware of the impact of their attitudes, particularly towards African American students, and use the influence of their expectations for the well-being of young people. Teachers are encouraged to build positive relationships with parents and students, instruct using culturally relevant teaching methods, and hold high expectations (Kafele, 2009; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Although teachers are knowledgeable of these tools through collegiate training and professional development, one cannot help but wonder if they are actually being put into practice since the achievement gap still exists.

**Involuntary immigrants.** Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) cultural-ecological theory brings rationale to the power of education and how it has been used as a tool for advancement by other people groups. The cultural-ecological theory, contrived through comparative analysis, shows the connections between school and outer societal forces (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Foster, 2004; Ogbu, 1990). It studies behavior patterns attributed to environmental factors and has four components: academic success being tied to the community; the identification of minority subgroups; the gaps faced between students and schools; and the survival strategies, both positive and negative, that minority students develop over time as coping mechanisms.

Indeed, there are two types of immigrants, those who have come to the United States by voluntary means, and those who reside in the country involuntarily (Ogbu, 1990). Voluntary immigrant students are those whose families have come to the United States generally in search of a better life (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Whether their families are temporarily seeking asylum or planning to reside in the country for a lengthy amount of time, voluntary immigrants generally take on the mindset of a tourist, in that they will do whatever needs to be done to get by and not stand out (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). While voluntary immigrants may face some initial discrimination because of limited English-speaking abilities, over time the intolerance subsides as they acquire more English and find ways to pass as White Americans (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Furthermore, voluntary immigrants who do choose to retain their ethnic values and have strong ties in their communities tend to have high achievement (Akiba, 2007). Since voluntary immigrants come to the United States by choice, they have a different mindset and experience than those who have historically been brought to the country by force.

On the other side of the spectrum are the oblique experiences of involuntary immigrant students. Ogbu and Simons (1998) define involuntary immigrants as those who “are people who have been conquered, colonized, or enslaved. Unlike immigrant minorities, the nonimmigrants have been made to be a part of the U.S. society permanently against their will” (p. 165).

Examples of involuntary immigrants include:

American Indians and Alaska Natives, the original owners of the land, who were conquered; early Mexican Americans in the Southwest who were also conquered; Native Hawaiians who were colonized; Puerto Ricans who consider themselves a colonized people; and black Americans. (p. 166)

Involuntary immigrants often feel oppressed by the White majority and have a sense of hopelessness in that they will never overcome the oppression (Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

Individuals classified as either voluntary or involuntary immigrants are not defined by race, but rather a history of how minority status was achieved.

African American involuntary immigrants often carry their feelings of oppression into the public school system, and teachers may negatively misinterpret those feelings (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) instead of seeing the behavior as a form of resistance (Koonce, 2012; Linton & McLean, 2017; Morris, 2007). Many African American students are taught primarily by Caucasian women, and attribute school as a place where the “curriculum [is] an attempt to impose white culture on them” (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 178). Other Black students may develop a race-less persona, changing speech and tone to sound less Black, in order to achieve academic success (Fordham, 1993). Just like Barrax’s (1967) “Black Narcissus” poem suggests, some Black students may feel torn between fighting hegemonic structures and assimilation; the latter often becomes a burden that students carry, which Fordham (1993) describes as the burden of acting White. To cope, some Black American students value collective identity and forming a fictive kinship as a social identity (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Others may choose to underperform or be silent in class, while some may choose to speak up and show resilience (Fordham, 1993, 2013; Henry, 1998; Linton & McLean, 2017; Morris, 2007). Additionally, as involuntary immigrants, many Black families often distrust the American school system because of covert racism, even though they make claims to value education (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). These differences in attitudes and actions can also lead to low academic achievement.

**Decline of Black teachers.** In a recent report, Ingersoll and May (2016) describe trends in minority students and teachers in the United States. Data show that over a few decades, although the population of students has become more diverse (both racially and ethnically), the teaching field has become less diverse (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll & May, 2016). There has been a growth in the number of teachers (even minority teachers) in the United States, but a significant gap still exists between the percentage of minority students and minority teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll & May, 2016). If this trend continues, then the student population will continue to grow in racial and ethnic diversity and the educators teaching these students will look nothing like them. This can be problematic as there may be a disconnect or lack of quality student/teacher relationships, if students feel as though they cannot relate to their teachers or feel that their teachers do not understand them.

Research has shown that when working with African American students, having a proportionate amount of Black staff increases positive student behavior and academic success (Chapman, 2014; Irvine, 1989; Irvine & Irvine, 2007; Kunjufu, 2002). Schools and districts with larger proportions of African American staff are found to have “fewer African American students...suspended, expelled, or placed in special education classes” (Irvine & Irvine, 2007, p. 299). Furthermore, having such proportions increases the number of Black students placed in gifted and talented programs and also increases the number of high school graduates. On the other hand, having a disproportionate amount of Black or minority staff can adversely impact students and further increase the achievement gap.

Upon analyzing the data, this then leads to a discussion around teacher retention. Even though the number of Black and minority teachers has increased, there has been a higher turnover of minority teachers in public schools in the past decade (Carver-Thomas & Darling-

Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll & May, 2016). Some reasons for minority teacher turnover are positive, such as upward mobility and gaining employment in education-related jobs outside of the classroom (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll & May, 2016). The negative reason centers around a larger number of minority teachers being employed in hard-to-staff schools with less than desirable working conditions (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll & May, 2016). Despite turnover trends, African American teachers are vital to the classroom, and measures need to be made to retain them so that there can be longitudinal impact on Black student achievement and experiences.

There are many problems plaguing the education of African American students in the United States, particularly in the suburbs. As more students of color migrate to suburbs and matriculate through public school systems, more will be at risk to low teacher expectations, according to current trends. Looking at the data, suburban Black students will only continue to lag behind their White and Asian peers academically, especially if few teachers of color remain in the profession. If this pattern persists, these students may not make connections with their teachers and have their culture recognized. There are consequences to not recognizing one's identity and potential, as shown through the myth of Narcissus. Furthermore, from an educational standpoint, "Black Narcissus" shows that Black students desire to have their culture and identity honored and accepted within the classroom, instead of having to conform to White standards. The questions then become: Who can lead this work? How can Black students fully love themselves in an educational system that is not completely accepting of their identity? Who will teach them self-love and acceptance and help them rise to their potential?

Although there are many problems, a review of the literature suggests that there are solutions lying within care ethics, specifically within Black feminist care theory through a



phenomenon known as “othermothering.” Othermothering is rooted in West African tradition; it is the practice of Black women caring for other Black children not related by blood (Case, 1997; Collins, 2000a, 2005, 2015; Foster, 1993; Guiffida, 2005; James, 1993; Kakli, 2011; Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011; Loder, 2005; Wilson, 2010). Educators can use othermothering to connect with Black students and families in schools. The literature is quite vast surrounding the ethic of care, Black feminist care theory, and even othermothering in urban schools. There are fewer pieces that focus on Black female educators as othermothers in suburban K-12 settings. This leads to a few questions around othermothering in suburbia, which are the focus of this dissertation—what is the experience of the suburban othermother; what is her essence; how does she see herself and her responsibility to her community?

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Literature Review**

The ethic of care has varying perspectives and definitions. For the course of this dissertation, the focus will be on care ethics by Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (2003) as a foundation, proceeded by African and African American social ethics (Paris, 1995), Black feminism and womanism, and Black feminist care (Bass, 2012; Collins, 2000a). In the United States, mainstream ethics and morality have been shaped by White men. Traditional models of ethics and morality are from a male perspective, predicated on respecting the basic rights of individuals, shaped by justice (Card, 1991; Gilligan, 1982). This type of morality is more black and white, with restrictions on what one can and cannot do. The ethic of care is a radical shift from the traditional Western model of ethics, as it takes a feminist approach. In this framework, ethics and morality are tied to relationships and responsibilities, instead of rights (Card, 1991; Gilligan, 1982). Justice and fairness can still be obtained, as one chooses to value relationships and responsibilities when seeking to right wrongs (Card, 1991). An example of this would be in using restorative justice, where the goal is to restore relationships (Gregory et al., 2015; Macready, 2009; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012), over the current justice model, where wrongs are punished punitively.

The female approach to morality indicates that individuals are connected in their responsibilities toward one another, including an imperative to care for others (Gilligan, 1982). Care is a reciprocal response to someone else's needs (Gilligan, 1982) by meeting the needs of others, being fair and equal, and acting from a place of empathy (Bass, 2012; Roberts, 2010).

Additionally, care liberates individuals and causes one to depart “from one’s own personal comfort zone while pursuing the best interest of those cared for” (Bass, 2012, p. 76). Care can be uncomfortable, but may be necessary, in order to meet the needs of someone else. Using Gilligan’s work as a foundation, Noddings (2003) further establishes the ethic of care with classroom implications, asserting that educators have a moral obligation to care.

### **Moral Obligation**

First, one must identify the difference between caring and caregiving (Noddings, 2010); the two are related but not synonymous. Caring is an act that enables individuals to respond based on the needs of others, while caregiving is the labored practice of caring. “Caring is not synonymous with caregiving,” writes Noddings (2010); “[It] is a way of encountering others” (p. 80). There are three categorized roles within care: one-caring (the one showing care), cared-for (the one receiving care), and caring-about (individuals and causes needing care).

Morality is an active virtue; in practice, this looks like acting on another person’s behalf through the form of caring (Noddings, 2003, 2010). Additionally, in order to care, one must go beyond feelings (Noddings, 2003, 2010). Oftentimes, an individual must reflect on times when care has been demonstrated in the past, and choose to go beyond himself or herself, solely because it is the right thing to do. Caring can be both natural and ethical; as a needs-based ethic, individuals show care through ideals or memories that trigger actions (Bass, 2009; Noddings, 2003, 2010). Noddings (2010) further describes care ethics: “Persons guided by an ethical ideal of caring do not simply break a rule when they fail to respond with care; they break something in themselves” (p. 71). In order to virtuously care, one must push past feelings.

This ability to care beyond oneself is also known as corrective action (Bass, 2009, 2012). Corrective action requires two steps: investigating and investing. Investigating deals directly

with the problem—finding out what it is, why it exists, and actions needed to remedy it.

Investing is resource-based—finding the appropriate resources to act towards the solution (Bass, 2012). This corrective action is a lived ethical experience through maintaining a caring attitude and attending to personal well-being (Noddings, 2010). This is also called balanced caring, “a conscientiously considered way of balancing caring-for those in our inner circle and caring-about the well-being of those we cannot actually encounter” (p. 85). Balanced caring is identified by Gilligan (1982) as a post-conventional stage, where women learn that it is equally egregious to neglect self-care as it is to ignore the interests of others. Through caring for oneself, the one-caring can then fully care for others on a continual basis and foster a healthy relationship, without feeling run dry.

Currently, many schools are lacking care from both staff and students, undergoing a care crisis (Noddings, 2003). One outlet for the corrective action described above is moral education, as teaching is more than a role, but a caring relation (Noddings, 2003). Moral education goes beyond one institution or individual and looks at how systems can create care through interdependence (Noddings, 2003). As moral educators, teachers go beyond academics and seek to meet the needs of the whole student—spirit, mind, and body (Noddings, 2003). Teachers who care are very committed, relatable, and expressive; regardless of gender, they will act as a parent towards a student in a gentle and loving way (Vogt, 2002). This type of change has the ability to go beyond schools and touch other socio-ecological spheres. As one party extends care, particularly teachers, then a caring response will be initiated. This foundation and theory of care are more than ideal, but also the basis for Black feminist care, which will be described in detail later.

### Care Ethics Criticisms

While the ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003) is indeed a viable solution to transform teachers, students, and education as a whole, particularly in urban environments, it does have its pitfalls; it is not the perfect solution. Much like the field of education, the major researchers (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2003) whose voices are heard regarding the ethic of care are middle-class White women, who exclude minority voices while solely supporting one another (Thompson, 1998). This trend also occurs within mainstream views of feminism, which will be discussed later (hooks, 1986a, 1986b, 1989; Miles, 2008). Since the majority of theorists such as Gilligan and Noddings have helped shape the ethic of care, they then define what is caring through their own cultural and socioeconomic lenses (hooks, 1986a; Thompson, 1998). Ultimately, this perpetuates a racist, sexist system within the ethic of care, which has the potential to be used as a tool of liberation.

Although the ethic of care is presented as the moral thing to do, one must remember, “White morality is predicated on individual freedom of choice; African Americans, however, have not experienced the freedom of choice assumed by White morality” (Thompson, 1998, p. 534). To the detriment of the ethic of care, persons of color may be denied opportunities to make moral choices because of hegemonic practices and policies that have confined them through the course of history. Lack of opportunities to make choices includes (but is not limited to) districting policies and course samplings that vary in public schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) or no financial capital to relocate and the adverse effects of redlining and housing laws (St. John & Cadray, 2004). Assuming that all persons operate with the same morals and denying obstacles others may face in making moral choices whitewashes the ethic of care.

Consequently, the mainstream view of the ethic of care is “colorblind.” Colorblindness, a form of White privilege, stems from the idea of the melting pot, introduced during the industrial era of the United States, a time when many European immigrants were entering the country. The melting pot theory was established to convince immigrants that they could melt away their differences and conform to Americanized ways (Howard, 2006). While it is quite reasonable for individuals of European descent to be able to shed the ways of the “old country” and blend in, it is a far more difficult task for people of color. Distinctly written in the aforementioned poem “Black Narcissus,” even if racial minorities do everything to assimilate into a majority White culture, they will never be able to alter their skin pigmentation, which will always cause them to stand out (Barrax, 1967). Barrax (1967) states, “I will laugh when I see that I am still black” (p. 203). Likewise, people of color, particularly women of color, exhibit care in a way that is different from the mainstream culture and should be acknowledged as such, instead of silenced through means of colorblindness.

Individuals who claim to be colorblind see race as something that can be easily erased and ignored to establish equality. In relation to the ethic of care, colorblindness paints a uniform picture of what caring looks like, ignoring systemic power relations and structures that have left minorities uncared for (Bass, 2012; Thompson, 1998, 2004). Colorblindness is a model of deficit thinking that “treats race as [an] irrelevant, invisible and taboo topic” (Howard, 2006, p. 57; Henfield & Washington, 2012). It serves to comfort those accustomed to dominance while denying “the authentic existence of people whose experiences of reality [are] different” (Howard, 2006, p. 58). Colorblindness must be erased, and multiple methods of care must be established to accommodate people of all races (Thompson, 2004). This will make room for the ethic of care to operate fully and truly serve as a model for all.

More specifically to the ethic of care, colorblindness is displayed through ideals of White womanhood (Thompson, 1998, 2004). For example, “the ideals of White womanhood that the girls in...Gilligan’s work struggle with are unlikely to be an issue in the development of adolescent girls, because they are not Black women’s ideals of womanhood” (Thompson, 1998, p. 536). Overlooking the contributions of Black women to womanhood masks their unique strengths, particularly as it relates to mothering. White ideals of womanhood and mothering ignore the tradition of “othermothering,” a model of shared/community mothering, that has been passed down through West African roots (James, 1993; Thompson, 1998) and asserts one sole manner of mothering. This same ideal and colorblindness within care and mainstream feminism ignore the historical power and presence of the Black church in the African American community, that has shown care not just to individuals but to families, neighborhoods, and entire regions (Bass, 2012; Miles, 2008; Thompson, 1998). Colorblindness assumes that home life is the same for all, when what looks like “home” can vary, especially for individuals in an urban setting (Bass, 2012; Thompson, 1998).

For example, within the African American communities, Black men may head church buildings, but Black women are those who rule the church of the home, as hooks (1986b) articulates. Their assertions, threats, and orders within the home are life-giving and caring, which may seem in opposition to the mainstream ethic of care, mothering, and womanhood (hooks, 1986b). Many Black women care in a lovingly firm way, through political clarity, which will be discussed further within Black feminist care. The knowledge and preparation that Black women give to their families in the home may differ than White women, but it is care work, nonetheless. It is important for those within the mainstream movements to create inclusive models by working communally with women of color and acknowledge other examples of care.

Although care does yield a sense of moral responsibility to meet the needs of others and go beyond oneself, it presents a morality steeped in Whiteness (Thompson, 1998). In order for care to transform urban education, the minority perspective must not only be considered but adopted. As Roberts (2010) writes, “the fields of care and moral development have often empirically and theoretically overlooked teacher care, its connection to culture and its powerful influence in the lives of African American students” (p. 452). Care within urban classrooms needs to be modeled from a womanist or Black feminist (Collins, 2000a; Thompson, 2004) perspective in order to transform pedagogy and environments to their fullest ability. This takes place through recognizing traditions of the community, unique issues faced by the inhabitants, and the demanding role of the educator as community pillar and pedagogue.

### **African and African American Spirituality and Social Ethics**

Just as the ethic of care is a shift from the traditional, individualistic, justice-based model of ethics and morality, the social ethics of Africans and African Americans differ from Western culture as well. The ethics of those within the African diaspora focus on the interdependence between God, community, family, and person (Paris, 1995). God is a supreme being and “religion permeates every dimension of African life” (p. 27), meaning that God is present in everything. The life one lives is spiritual, and so are daily decisions. Through this worldview, individuals, who are expressions of God, form community. Community is divine, a “sacred phenomenon created by the supreme God” (p. 51) and the decisions a person makes impact his or her family and community. There is no individualism, nor separatism; each of the four facets (God, community, family, and person) is in relationship with each other and is dependent upon one another. Likewise, there are spiritual implications that follow one’s decisions; individual wrongdoings are spiritual offences that become the responsibility of all to repent for (Paris,



1995). As such, this interdependence cultivates communalism among African peoples that impact ways of knowing and ways of life.

Additionally, morality for African peoples is interdependent as well. Morals and virtue are embodied by individual people, yet it is the responsibility of the family and community to develop these values within individuals (Paris, 1995). While the ethic of care stresses an ethical responsibility to care for others (Card, 1991; Gilligan, 1982), African and African American ethics provide a symbiotic model of development, where each component assumes responsibility for the other. There is no separation of one part from the other, and it is neither conceivable nor possible (Paris, 1995). Since everything is connected, in practice, this looks like communal celebrations of marriage and other rites of passage, and even the shared care of children within communities (Paris, 1995). The goal of moral development in this manner is to raise individuals who will lead and do good in communities in the future (Paris, 1995). This reflects the interdependence of African and African American ethics; there is no beginning and no end, but rather a continual, sustainable, communal continuum.

**Virtues.** There are many virtues for African peoples to impart, but the most prominent are beneficence, forbearance, practical wisdom, improvisation, forgiveness, and justice (Paris, 1995). For African and African Americans, beneficence is more than doing good—it is the contentment in and prioritization of the well-being of others over themselves. This looks like hosting out-of-town guests, even if it means sleeping on the floor while guests sleep in the host's bed, as a gesture of honor (Paris, 1995). Beneficence leads to a good destiny spiritually, which impacts all and is the opposite of individualism (Paris, 1995). Likewise, communalism is also achieved through the virtue of forbearance, recognized as patience and tolerance. Not to be confused with complacency, forbearance among African peoples is the ability to withstand and

survive harsh circumstances through generations (Paris, 1995), such as racial oppression and injustice, and preserving ways of life for the betterment of the community.

Forbearance is supported by the collective wisdom of elders, and practical wisdom is a virtue that is valued in African cultures (Paris, 1995). It includes having the ability and discernment to make reasonable judgments that will lead to a good life (Paris, 1995). Practical wisdom needs example and practice to acquire and execute. This means that children will emulate practical wisdom that they see modeled by elders in their family and community. While many African virtues can be taught through modeling, such as beneficence, forbearance, and practical wisdom, improvisation is an art that takes practice through the encouragement of creativity and individual uniqueness (Paris, 1995). Storytelling, proverbs, music, art, and dance are all examples of improvisation in the African diaspora. Expressing oneself in this manner preserves community, promotes the well-being of individuals, and uplifts the spirits of others (Paris, 1995). This virtue, like the others, is interdependent and woven through all aspects of the culture.

Preserving community leads to lack of hatred toward others, or forgiveness, which is another virtue of African and African American ethics (Paris, 1995). Hatred, such as racial hatred, hinders relationships, which goes against the social ethics of African peoples. Choosing to forgive wrongdoings in the natural brings spiritual reconciliation and continues the well-being of family and community (Paris, 1995). While forgiveness is a great act, the greatest virtue is justice because it is comprised of all the other virtues (Paris, 1995). While Western views of justice focus on the individual, fairness, and making wrongs right, the interdependence of African ethics shapes justice as an individual's obligations to the community through relationships and how the community is committed to its members and itself (Paris, 1995). This

looks like making sure the well-being of individuals, families, and communities are met. Having this balance and harmony is a form of justice, and understanding the totality of this virtue gives better insight into Black women in the United States, and how they provide care to students in the classroom.

### **Black Feminism and Womanism**

Black women are a unique group in that they are part of two oppressed identities as women and as individuals of color (Cooper, 2017; Cooper & Morris, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989). Along with race and gender also come issues of class (Cooper, 2017; hooks, 1986a, 1994). The lived experiences of Black women are multidimensional; they are not simply female, nor solely Black (Collins, 2000b; Cooper, 2017; Cooper & Morris, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1986, 1994). African American women live at the intersection of these social constructs, while much of the world operates from a single-axis framework that focuses on the most privileged group (Crenshaw, 1989). The needs of those who are multidimensional then become greater than those who have a single, privileged identity (Crenshaw, 1989). In addition to identities intersecting, oppressive forces intersect as well, and have the ability to change as society changes (Collins, 2000a). A matrix of domination describes how intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and persist (Collins, 2000a). For instance, some types of racial discrimination that a Black woman in the United States may face have changed from the 1950s compared to now. The oppression still exists, but the form has changed.

Those who are multiply burdened, or have multiple identities, become marginalized in such a framework (Crenshaw, 1989). This means that the needs and experiences of these people groups, such as Black women, often are ignored and even silenced (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; Crenshaw, 1989; Dotson, 2015; hooks, 1986a, 1986b, 1989). Instead of silencing these voices,

new paradigms need to be developed to give room for multidimensional thoughts to arise (Collins, 2000b). When examining the role of a Black female educator in a majority-White suburban school, one must use an intersectional paradigm to understand not only her multidimensionality, but the dominating forces within her workplace. A Black female educator who has a middle-class background and works at a school that is majority-White, in a community that is highly affluent, is going to face challenges as these two worlds collide. She will have to understand the privilege that her students have and may also struggle with fitting in racially and economically, in addition to being a woman.

Two major epistemologies, Black feminist thought and womanism, seek to explain the complex experience of Black women and can be used as a research framework. While Black feminism and womanism have often been blurred and overlapped (Collins, 1996, 2000b; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015) as they both center around the identity of the Black woman, there are some distinct differences between the two. Womanism is often confused with Black feminism, as Walker (1983) provides four definitions with two contradictory meanings and philosophies (Collins, 1996). The first definition explains that the word “womanist” derives from a Black folk expression, “womanish,” describing a young girl acting grown up; this explanation also includes Black feminists and feminists of color, which shows that the two constructs have some similarities (Collins, 1996). Second, a womanist is defined as a woman who loves men and women, sexually and/or non-sexually, and is committed to the uniting of all people. A womanist is also one who loves fully; she is dedicated to loving culture and herself. Last, an analogy is given that “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (Walker, 1983, pp. xi-xii), which also shows a connection between womanism and Black feminism (Collins, 1996). In the context

of this analysis, Black feminism and womanism will be used in conjunction with one another so that the strengths of both theories can have room to emerge.

**Black feminist thought.** Though often silenced, Black feminism provides a means and space for African American female voices to be heard and empowered (Collins, 1996; hooks, 1986b, 1989; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). Black feminist thought (BFT) deals specifically with the unique experiences of African American women in the United States (Collins, 2000a; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015) and how they are part of the global struggle for women's emancipation (Collins, 1996). BFT addresses the commonalities that Black women in America experience while also validating individual experiences (Collins, 1986). The framework has a foundation "laid in the writings and speeches of prolific scholars like Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, WEB Dubois, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper and Zora Neale Hurston" (Bass, 2012, p. 75). Black feminism has a long history, and the work of these scholars is what paved the way.

BFT has six distinct components, according to Collins (2000a): historical shared oppression, diverse responses to similar challenges, shared lived experiences, intellectualism, dynamic change, and dedication to social justice overall. First, BFT chronicles the collective oppression and activism of African American women in the United States over time. BFT is also unique in that it shows that although there are collective struggles, there are diverse responses within the group. Autonomy and individualism are also accommodated, acknowledging that while Black women belong to a group as a whole, each woman will have individual experiences and responses. Additionally, BFT takes those individual experiences and connects them to the larger group knowledge or thought. BFT also uses intellectualism to ask "the right questions and [investigates] all dimensions of a Black women's standpoint with and for African-American women" (Collins, 2000a, p. 33). This means that the scholars within the community will use

their knowledge to enact social justice. Building upon social capital and action, BFT recognizes that change is necessary for a progressive movement. Those operating from a BFT standpoint become flexible and adapt their methodology to meet the demands of the times. Finally, those involved in social justice from a BFT perspective recognize “that Black women’s struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice” (Collins, 2000a, p. 41). As such, Black feminists use individual experiences as a collective to become agents of social justice.

Black feminism is also characterized by ethics of care and personal accountability (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). Collins (2000a) describes the ethic of care as a work of the heart. The ethic of care within Black feminism is characterized by three interrelated components: individual uniqueness, expressing emotion, and developing empathy (Collins, 2000a). Much like the virtue of improvisation in African and African American social ethics, individual uniqueness is the ability to express oneself freely, often artistically, whether through quilting or music (Collins, 2000a). Expressing emotion, particularly in dialogue, shows conviction and validity of a statement (Collins, 2000a), which can be mistaken for anger or loudness by others. Finally, developing empathy is used to build relationships with others and create a connection (Collins, 2000a). As these three components intertwine, they lead Black women to truth and, ultimately, care. Just as spirituality is integral within African and African American social ethics (Paris, 1995), the Black church becomes a central place where the ethic of care is evident. It is shown through the expressiveness in music, the emotion of call-and-response preaching, and the empathy developed between members as “brothers” and “sisters” (Collins, 2000a; Gilkes, 2001). These are all traits that make caring unique within Black feminism, particularly as they become a way of teaching and knowing for Black women.

The care that Black women exhibit collectively can lead to a personal accountability to teach, train, and lead one another and uplift the race through a sense of agency. As early as the 1900s, activists such as Fannie Barrier Williams and Mary Church Terrell developed and led organizations geared towards the well-being of African American women, and making their lived experience public (Cooper, 2017). Organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and the Colored Women's League (CWL) served as social, scholarly sources for African American women to be honored, seen, and heard in greater capacity beyond the church, even before Black feminism had been formally termed (Cooper, 2017). Furthermore, they became places where Black women could bond through similar lived experiences and be respected as leaders.

While the Black church can also be a place of male domination (Collins, 2000b; hooks, 1986b), one can argue that women hold positions of authority in their own right within the organization (Collins, 2000b). It is the work of Black women that has allowed the Black church to thrive, through fundraising, committee work, and leading auxiliaries (Collins, 2000a; Gilkes, 2001; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). The leadership style of women in the Black church is communal and in line with the social ethics of African peoples, creating a sisterhood among Black women (Collins, 2000a). This differs from traditional, hierarchical models within the church. Through servitude and teaching, African American women have attained a sense of greatness; they are liberated to serve and care because they see it as a spiritual strength (Grant, 1993). Historically, Black women in the church have concentrated in education of the Bible, thus gaining influence within their social circle, as a means of rejecting the role given to them through cultural and social hegemony (Collins, 2000a; Grant, 1993). Although segregation tried to keep African Americans from gaining education, Black women encouraged each other to

receive education through the church, where older women often taught younger women how to navigate and thrive in a harsh world (Collins, 2000a). In the face of adversity, Black women have continued to rise, while simultaneously uplifting others in the community through agency.

One criticism of Black feminism is the strong heteronormative influence of Black spirituality (Coleman, 2006; Collins, 1996), which often marginalizes the voice of Black lesbians (Coleman, 2006; Collins, 1996). Homosexuality is often a taboo subject in the African American community, and some Black feminists find difficulty accepting lesbianism as part of the epistemology (Coleman, 2006; Collins, 1996). Another criticism is that Black feminism is viewed as exclusional as the intentional title can appear as separatist and oppositional to mainstream feminism (Collins, 1996). Although Black feminists see themselves as part of a global issue in regards to women's liberation, the title allows Black women to identify with race along with their gender (Collins, 1996). However, critics believe that White women created feminism as a tool to gain the same power that White men held, which still excluded people of color; to add "Black" to the word "feminist" still does not make the term all-inclusive when it comes to de-centering individuals and power structures (Cooper & Morris, 2017; Hudson-Weems, 2006; Ogunyemi, 2006). Thus, some view Black feminism as divisive and feel that the terminology should be changed to encompass the social justice issues of all social constructs, including gender.

The title "Black feminist" can also cause separation within the race among men and women (Collins, 1996). In traditional Black family structures, Black women will support Black men at all costs; however, Black feminism dismantles this unwritten code by encouraging women to raise their voices (Boylorn, 2017; Collins, 1996). As Black feminists began to speak up against sexual harassment, abuse, and other travesties that occur between sexes within the



race, some divide occurred between Black men and women (Collins, 1996). Critics of the term desired a name that would elicit intergenerational and gender unity that would create a sense of wholeness and self-healing; hence, womanism evolved (Ogunyemi, 2006). As stated earlier, “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (Walker, 1983, pp. xi-xii); feminism is part of and closely related to womanism, but womanism has a wider, more-encompassing focus when advocating for the liberation of all.

**Womanism.** As an attempt to connect with humanity at large, womanism does not view the experiences of Black women as separate from the struggles of other people (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005b; Collins, 2000a; Walker, 1983). Seeking to be more collective than Black feminism, womanism “is a theoretical perspective that sees the experiences of black women as normative, not as a derivation or variation of black males or white female behavior” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 72). In Western culture, the worldview has traditionally been established by White males, and womanism challenges this norm. The main principle of womanism is that when addressing any problem, Black womanhood is the point of origination from which to begin speaking (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; Phillips & McCaskill, 1995). Black women are often marginalized because of race, gender, and class—they may be seen as Black, or as women, or from a particular social class, but rarely are these intersecting constructs viewed in totality when considering their perspective. Womanism places all Black women of the entire African diaspora in the center, purposely taking them out of the margins, and challenges scholarship with White men in the center (Phillips & McCaskill, 1995). This differs from BFT, which focuses solely on the experiences of Black women in the United States (Collins, 2000a; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). While Black feminism focuses on the individual experiences of Black women, womanism has a more global perspective and seeks a unifying goal.

Womanism acknowledges the universal struggle of those who are marginalized and creates three central points: the interlocking of oppression, power, and privilege; social transformation through individual empowerment and collective activism; and the liberation of all through humanism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005b; Collins, 2000a). Another way that this has been interpreted is that universally, each individual (no matter gender, race, etc.) will accept responsibility to work with others to solve problems and end oppression for all people (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). In practice, this looks like intergenerational socialization, or generations of older women compelled to teach younger women and help shape their identity (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). Intergenerational socialization occurs within Black feminism, but the practice is more traditional, whereas the goal within womanism is for harmony and balance to occur with humans and in the spirit realm (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; Phillips & McCaskill, 1995). Essentially, these strategies that are passed down are what will help Black women thrive and develop a sense of agency (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). With a broader sense of justice, womanism uses the strengths of Black women to network and collectively gather others in the margins and lead them to liberation.

Although strong in universalist and humanist principles, womanism has its pitfalls as well. As womanism is rooted in the history of the Black woman's oppression (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; Phillips & McCaskill, 1995; Walker, 1983), a Black nationalist stance is given (Collins, 1996). But at the same time, it claims Black women to be universal (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; Phillips & McCaskill, 1995; Walker, 1983), which contradicts the humanist vision of the theoretical framework (Collins, 1996). Additionally, as womanism has claims to be universal and accepting of all people, Black lesbians have also found themselves ignored (Coleman, 2006; Collins, 1996). While womanists may not be as vocal about distinguishing themselves from this

group as some Black feminists, overall, many Black lesbians have found themselves silenced and marginalized within the framework and overall scholarship (Coleman, 2006; Collins, 1996).

Models of liberation are not without human error. Both BFT and womanism have strengths and weaknesses, and it is their strengths that can be built upon to create other epistemologies, frameworks, and ways of understanding.

### **Black Feminist Care**

Within BFT, Black women in the United States are connected by individual experiences, using care to move towards truth, agency, and justice. Womanism centers Black women and their lived experiences and acknowledges their struggles as collective with other oppressed groups. Womanism is global and seeks liberation for all. The interconnectedness of Black women within BFT and womanism is tied to the interdependence of African and African American social ethics. Therefore, the rich components of BFT and womanism, combined with the ethic of care and African ethics, create what is known as Black feminist care (BFC). Bass (2012) reports that BFC “frames an ethic of care within BFT as a foundation of African-American women’s epistemology that combines history, culture, and experiences with individual uniqueness, expressiveness, emotion and empathy” (p. 77). BFC places the unique experiences of Black women at the center of the ethic of care, and for the purposes of this dissertation, three categories of BFC will be discussed: respect for the whole person, political clarity, and othermothering.

**Respect for the whole person.** Much like traditional views of care, BFC holds a moral responsibility to show concern for other individuals. What makes BFC unique, however is the role of the Black church in conveying care. Historically, spirituality has had deep roots within the African American community, and it has been the role of the Black church, combined with

family (both blood and fictive kin), to demonstrate the role of caring to others (Bass, 2009; Collins, 2000a; Thompson, 1998). When examining care from a BFC perspective, one must take into consideration the “overarching ethic of responsibility to family, church and community” (Thompson, 1998, p. 533). As shown with Black feminism and womanism, intergenerational socialization and interdependence are strengths in the Black community, along with the church, which become part of the foundation for demonstrating care. The morality within BFC differs from the White morality of the mainstream ethic of care in that it is more communal and driven by a higher power (Bass, 2009; Gyant, 1996; Thompson, 1998); the mainstream ethic of care is more individualistic, focusing on self-reflection (Knight, 2004; Noddings, 2003, 2010). The communal and spiritual nature of care demonstrated by Black women is rooted in the interdependence of African and African American ethics (Paris, 1995). There is no separatism in the ethics of African peoples, so when exhibiting care towards others, the whole person must be cared about because the well-being of one’s spirit, soul, and body is interrelated as well as interconnected to the family and community.

Driven by morals instilled by the Black church, educators at various levels have described care as showing concern, accounting for an individual’s well-being (mind, soul, and body), responding to the needs of others (physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual), and going out of one’s way to help (Bass, 2009; Grant, 1993). This form of care is also known as being concerned with the whole person (Morris, 1999). More specifically, this means instead of just focusing on one aspect of a person, the educator takes the time to make sure the person is content and cared for in all areas, whether it relates to the school setting or not (Knight, 2004). Historically, this has included making sure students are adequately fed outside of school, opening up one’s home after school to provide a safe haven for children, and running

extracurricular and auxiliary organizations through the church to help uplift students (Gyant, 1996; James, 1993). Education becomes more than curriculum, pedagogy, and instruction when caring for the whole person. If a student has book smarts, but has not been taught how to excel physically, emotionally, and in other aspects of life, then the educator has failed the student. To educate the whole person, through BFC, means setting students up for life success including, but also beyond, the academic.

In Bass' (2009) qualitative study, five educators described the connection to church and spirituality that drives African American women to show care in school settings. When asked if religion or spirituality influenced beliefs and practices of care, the educators responded overwhelmingly that it did. This connection to a higher being is what drives the educators to care at all district levels (Bass, 2009). It is this relationship with a higher power that drives student-centered education, as teaching becomes more than an occupation for African American women, but an act of service, or ministry, to children and families (Lynn, Johnson, & Hassan, 1999). Black educators have gone above and beyond in a plethora of ways because they feel it is part of their spiritual calling to make sure students succeed, by any means necessary.

Finally, being concerned with the whole person also connects to concern for students' futures (Roberts, 2010). Teachers operating from a BFC model hold a strong desire to see students progress in life and even change society. "African American teachers are often proficient in understanding and appreciating community norms and concerned that their students master much more than the content specific subjects; indeed the students are to master life" (p. 460). BFC influences Black teachers to help students, particularly students of color, understand their place in society as ethnic minorities and how they will be viewed by the world.

Other examples of how BFC educators show concern for the future of their students is through teaching students how to avoid the law, prepare for a job, and get into college.

**Political clarity.** Part of being concerned for students' futures includes colortalk (Thompson, 2004) or frank conversations about race in connection to the world around them (Bartolome, 1994; Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Hoffman, 2009; Thompson, 2004), which is related to political clarity. Colortalk is the opposite of colorblindness; instead of politely ignoring racial differences, colortalk allows for discussions to come forth that reassure students of color that race truly does matter (Thompson, 2004). It takes away the shameful stigma that colorblindness has placed upon race and helps students connect through sharing experiences (Thompson, 2004). Within BFC, educators allow racial conversations and turn them into intentional, specific political lessons about the larger implications of race in society, otherwise known as political clarity.

Political clarity refers to the recognition of outside spheres (social, economic, etc.) that shape students' academic performance (Bartolome, 1994; Hoffman, 2009; Stovall, 2007). This framework first requires educators to acknowledge that the classroom is a political site where power and privilege vie for control (Bartolome, 1994; Brookfield, 1993; Giroux & McLaren, 1986). Once this becomes recognized and the instructor moves from teacher-centered to student-centered pedagogy (Giroux & McLaren, 1986), explicit conversations about race and its realities (and even consequences) can be held between students, parents, and educators alike (Hoffman, 2009; Roberts 2010). Once again, collectivism and intergenerational socialization become vital to enacting care this way, as these traits are deeply rooted in Black culture.

While White children and the mainstream ethic of care view maintaining innocence through colorblindness and ignoring race, those employing BFC recognize that American culture

is steeped in racism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Hoffman, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; LaRaviere, 2008). Political clarity helps educators to become aware of widespread injustices and inequities that students face and give them voice (Bondy & Hambacher, 2016; Hoffman, 2009; Knight, 2004). In order for students of color to succeed, BFC educators demonstrate care by teaching students how to navigate through a system of racism, oppression, and privilege (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Roberts, 2010; Thompson, 2004). This stems beyond culturally relevant teaching—teaching with the cultures of the students in mind—to what Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1999) labels as politically relevant teaching.

Politically relevant teaching burgeons from culturally relevant teaching, focusing on the “political, historical, social, as well as cultural understandings that such teachers bring to their classroom” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999, pp. 704-705). It transcends race, ethnicity, and the like, focusing on the actions of an educator to honor all viewpoints, particularly those who are marginalized (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Hoffman, 2009; Stovall, 2007). Politically relevant teaching allows students to think critically about their world and the decisions that impact their community, as explored in LaRaviere’s (2008) research. Students in this particular study were taught to question and ask what was left out when negative reports of their urban, impoverished community were on the news. Through critical questioning, the students realized that the authority figures (police) being positively portrayed had a history of antagonizing members of the community that was not widely discussed.

Politically relevant teaching spans beyond groupings and moves all parties involved to political action (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Hoffman, 2009; LaRaviere, 2008; Stovall, 2007). Upon becoming abreast of educational inequalities in funding and services in one Chicago school, a community gathered together to stage a hunger strike (Stovall, 2007). This strike lasted

19 days, resulting in community organizers being brought to the negotiating table as construction plans were being made concerning neighborhood schools. The politically relevant mindset of the community helped parents and students regain power over their education. Less extreme political actions that communities can take include letter-writing to politicians, partnering with the local city-wide transit system to provide more transportation for students, and creating thought-provoking displays for the public to see (Hoffman, 2009; Stovall, 2007). Regardless of the size of the effort, BFC pulls on the strengths of BFT and womanism to develop agency, social justice, and liberation within Black communities through political clarity.

Teachers who are politically relevant see themselves as liberators or gate-openers rather than gate-keepers (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999, 2005b; Stovall, 2007). Gate-keeping points are structures and systemic practices that prevent students from advancing, such as standardized tests and grading policies (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Stovall, 2007). Politically relevant teachers view classrooms and schools as centers for social change and social justice (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). They examine texts critically and provide multiple viewpoints to historical events and are taught the proper literacy skills to do so (Delpit, 1986; LaRaviere, 2008). Educators in these contexts also make content relevant to students—for instance, by pairing classical literature with a current hip-hop piece (LaRaviere, 2008). Within these learning environments, students are seen as activists; they are listened to and taught about the use of power (Delpit, 1995; Hoffman, 2009). It is the role of Black educators who are guided by a BFC mindset to not only liberate students, schools, and communities, but to give others the tools to hold power and free themselves.

Historically, African Americans have had a narrative of survival since the time of slavery; passing down pragmatic tools to survive in society with political clarity is seen as care



(Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Thompson, 2004). As slaves, once children reached the age of 5 or 6, they began to be put to work. The harsh realities of slavery required frank conversations about race and survival. Keeping enslaved children ignorant about the implications of race could be fatal; parents spoke with clarity in order to give children tools to live within the system (Thompson, 2004). During segregation, Black teachers in segregated schools were driven to perform the “racial uplift” of students; as quiet revolutionaries, they felt spiritually and morally compelled to engage, empower, and equip students in the fight against racism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). Race cannot be ignored, and to do so in Black culture would be seen as uncaring (Thompson, 2004). Political clarity was crucial to educating African American children, and still carries on to this day.

Specifically in the modern classroom, as BFC teachers are compelled to educate the whole person, political clarity enables educators to see how race will impact a child’s future and, in turn, teach them necessary skills for survival. This may look like teaching students how to code-switch, treating students as if they were their own children, empowering students to combat racism, and making students understand the importance of education (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999, 2002; Roberts, 2010). Teachers may also modify the curriculum to ensure that multiple narratives are heard regarding history, instead of the dominant, mainstream culture’s lone viewpoint (Thompson, 2004). While doing these things may seem overwhelming for children and teenagers to handle, when done out of care, it can help students become their best selves.

**Othermothering.** A concept unique to the African American community is fictive kinship (Collins, 2000a; James, 1993; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Wong, 2010). This form of collectivism describes individuals outside of biological parameters who are like family (Collins, 2000a; James, 1993; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Wong, 2010). While there are many fictive

“cousins,” “uncles,” “sisters,” and “brothers” within the community, the most honored and coveted role is that of the “othermother.” Historically, this role of the Black mother has been exhibited as one of power (Collins, 1991, 2005, 2015; James, 1993). African American women who are hailed as an othermother often gain recognition and status in their domains (Case, 1997; Collins, 2000; James, 1993) through developing non-biological children socially, emotionally, and intellectually (Case, 1997; Collins, 1991, 2000a, 2005, 2015; Foster, 1993; Guiffrida, 2005; Kakli, 2011; James, 1993; Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011; Loder, 2005; Wilson, 2010). This form of mothering has become a pinnacle in the development of Black communities, and is used by Black women as political agents who lead social justice and liberation movements.

Also known as Black activist mothering (McDonald, 1997), othermothering is “an honored tradition dating back to African Americans’ West African roots, a tradition in which childrearing was shared by adults even when birth mothers were available” (Thompson, 1998, p. 534). Reproduction and motherhood have great value not only in West Africa, but in the world views of many other indigenous people groups (Collins, 2015; James, 1993). Mothers are highly regarded in African culture, and mothering is symbolic of creativity and continuity (Collins, 1991, 2005, 2015; James, 1993). As such, motherhood is an important part of a woman’s identity in African culture (Collins, 1991, 2005, 2015; James, 1993). West African women who were part of polygynous households often shared nurturing responsibilities for children outside of their own individual biological offspring (Collins, 1991, 2005, 2015; James, 1993). In the Gold Coast (currently Ghana), women were expected to marry, reproduce, and care for children while simultaneously being economically active by means of fishing or working the family farm (James, 1993). Taking care of other’s children by women within the community-at-large was a way of promoting communalism and helping to relieve women as they

worked (Collins, 1991, 2005, 2015; James, 1993). This form of collectivism helped to strengthen families, communities, and the economy as women chose to look beyond themselves and help each other.

As West African men and women became enslaved, family patterns became disrupted and Africans were exposed to the gender ideologies and practices of slaveholders, where women cared for the home as men worked (Collins, 1991, 2015). However, the structure and demands of slavery made it impossible for women to solely nurture while men provided (Collins, 1991, 2015). As slaves, African American women continued this trend of caring for children while being responsible for household chores within the slave quarters (James, 1993). During times of slavery, the mother was known as “Mammy,” a strong image of domestic servitude (Bass, 2009, 2012; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Collins, 1991, 2000a, 2005, 2015). Enslaved families often experienced high amounts of instability, as male partners were often sold and destroyed (Case, 1997; Guiffida, 2005; James, 1993). Shared care of children was vital during slavery as families were split up and child-rearing extended beyond bloodlines; orphaned children would become the responsibility of other women within the slave quarters (Case, 1997; Collins, 1986, 1991, 2015; Guiffida, 2005; James, 1993). After slavery, most women became agricultural workers for low pay; as women went to work on farms as sharecroppers, children became cared for by other women in the community (Collins, 1991, 2005, 2015). Societal structures may have changed for Black families throughout the years, but the communal practice of shared mothering has persisted and still persists.

This phenomenon has since come to be known and passed down as “othermothering.” As slavery ended and segregated schools emerged, the role of the othermother eventually expanded to the classroom teacher (Foster, 1993; Guiffida, 2005), which will be discussed in

more detail later. The tradition of the working mother trickled down as well; mothers worked to support families and their hard work outside of the home was viewed as care (Thompson, 2004). Othermothering was also used as an alternative for childcare and schooling for those who did not have the financial means to do so (Collins, 2000a; Guiffrida, 2005). This communal view of care and motherhood in Black culture is what separates BFC from the aforementioned mainstream ethic of care and strengthens it by placing Black women at the center.

Typically, othermothering is a skill that is cultivated at a young age and passed through generations (Case, 1997). At younger ages, this nurturing ability is viewed by the community more as a “sisterfriend” than an “othermother”; the woman does not yet have enough status to become an othermother (Case, 1997; Collins, 1991, 2005, 2015; Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011). However, after the age of 40, the woman “has an understanding of the traditions and cultures of the community and utilizes her power more globally, while commanding the respect of the community locally” (Case, 1997, p. 27). Therefore, once the woman has matured and been in the community long enough to gain respect, she begins to work on behalf of others, through activism.

Nowadays, some African American women who have earned the honor are revered as neighborhood mother figures within their communities. Instead of the oppressive, White, middle-class standards of motherhood that have tainted Black mothers (i.e., welfare queens, etc.), othermothering liberates the Black woman and allows her to work as an activist, both in the community and abroad (Collins, 2000a). Othermothers have the ability to reach young people in a way that their biological mothers may not be able to and provide wisdom, insight, safety, mentoring, and counsel (Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011; Troester, 1984). Specifically, for the

constructs of this study, this calls for an examination of how Black women demonstrate care and act as mothers within the educational system.

### **The Role of Black Teachers**

Black American teachers and other educators from the African diaspora have a variety of ideas regarding their role as educators, yet many of these ideas are centered around Black feminist thought and care. In a study of secondary school principals in Trinidad and Tobago, Morris (1999) asserts that the women's educational practices were driven by "an ethic of care, collaboration, connectedness, and the use of power and commitment" (p. 347). Additionally, some of the women in the study viewed educational leadership as a divine act of service, or mission. Both male and female educators see their work as a ministry that is often (from both female and male educators) steeped in Black feminist thought (Bass, 2009; Lynn et al., 1999). As times have changed, Black educators have found different ways to perform their unique roles and display care in the classroom.

**Care during segregation.** During segregation, schools were purposely divided by race to intentionally provide educational inequalities for Black and White students (Beachum et al., 2008). Although African American students were subjected to educational neglect and opposition from the school system at large, their teachers still found ways to successfully deliver instruction, primarily through a model of care, particularly in those schools labeled as "good" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; hooks, 1994; Siddle Walker & Tompkins, 2004). Four traits within segregated African American schools included committed, well-trained staff, extracurricular activities and programs geared toward future success, parent support and outreach, and visionary leadership exhibited by administrators (Siddle Walker & Tompkins, 2004).

Teachers and administrators working in segregated schools demonstrated a relational care, also referred to as interpersonal care, in which “the person who is caring is concerned about, and will attempt to meet, the physical, psychological, and academic needs of the individual” (Siddle Walker & Tompkins, 2004, p. 79). This relational care can also be referred to as respect for the whole person (Bass, 2009; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Morris, 1999). Staff showed care to students in a variety of ways, specifically as counselors, encouragers, benefactors, and race cheerleaders (Siddle Walker & Tompkins, 2004). While educators demonstrated care within the four walls of school, they also extended themselves after hours and within the community.

Staff showed care as counselors by listening to students and making themselves available outside of school (Siddle Walker & Tompkins, 2004). Most teachers were community members, conducted home visits, and were well respected (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). Staff were approachable and nonjudgmental and gave solid advice. Operating from the “othermother” component of BFC, teachers and administrators solicited no-nonsense advice and tough love. Additionally, as encouragers, educators challenged students academically and beyond. Students reported feeling cared for, despite the ways staff pressed upon them, because they knew that those adults cared about their total or whole well-being (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Siddle Walker & Tompkins, 2004). Furthermore, staff remained in communities and taught generations, which created a deep bond, trust, and respect among students and families (Foster, 1993). These educators bloomed where they were planted and created roots where they served.

As benefactors, teachers and principals went above and beyond to provide for students and the community through the use of resources and influence. This included job assistance, helping students get into college, providing transportation, and the like (Siddle Walker &

Tompkins, 2004). Finally, as racial cheerleader, staff did not ignore race, but helped students find pride in their African history and heritage, which in turn led to student empowerment (Siddle Walker & Tompkins, 2004). Overall, staff were committed to student-centered education that promoted growth and uplifted the race (Gyant, 1996; Thompson, 2004). While segregated schools were a byproduct of a racist system and inequality, Black educators had the opportunity to create learning environments full of political clarity, racial uplift, and agency for change.

Once segregation ended, many African American teachers found themselves unemployed (Ford & Sassi, 2014); desegregation resulted in the closing of African American schools and Black students were integrated into pre-existing White schools (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Collins, 2009; hooks, 1994). Colorblindness was adopted by White staff as students of color began to be bused to White schools (Collins, 2009), and the few Black teachers who gained employment in these settings were expected to be colorblind as well (hooks, 1994). African American teachers who once used color talk as a means to motivate students lost their ability to do so as pressures came to conform to the unspoken rules of White-dominated institutions (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). While *Brown v. Board of Education* was a landmark decision (Collins, 2009), it ultimately heralded a wave of unemployment among Black teachers and served as a catalyst to the beginning of the decline (Collins, 2009). On a larger scale, desegregation disbanded the community cohesiveness once experienced in African American communities through caring school environments (Foster, 1993). The effects of desegregation impact the recruitment and retention rates of African American educators to this day.

**Culturally relevant critical teacher care.** A conglomerate of care theory, critical race theory (CRT) in education, and African American teacher care pedagogy, Roberts (2010) coined

the term *culturally relevant critical teacher care* (CRTC). CRTC builds upon the care work of Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (2003, 2010), that within the classroom, care needs to be reciprocated, individualized, and provided from a place of moral obligation in order to help students succeed (Roberts, 2010). Additionally, CRTC connects to CRT in education, which acknowledges two types of racism—individual and institutional—and how they impact students in the classroom (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Initially, CRT stemmed from the work of critical legal scholars who examined how the law impacts elements of culture (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). More specifically in education, CRT recognizes the intersection of racial inequity and intellectual property that creates school inequalities and posits that to overcome these inequalities, teachers fully acknowledge race instead of seeking to be colorblind or a melting pot (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Finally, CRTC invokes the tradition of African American teacher care, from othermothering to high classroom expectations (Roberts, 2010).

Within the classroom, CRTC is demonstrated through political clarity and concern for students' futures, two aforementioned BFC topics which also intersect with CRT (Roberts, 2010). Being intentional about conversations regarding race and showing concern for the whole person are also part of warm demander pedagogy (Bondy, Ross, Hambacher, & Acosta, 2013; Ross, Bondy, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2008; Ware, 2006). While the literature does not specifically tie warm demanders to BFC or CRTC, after a close examination of this practice, one can find a link between the two and see where they have overlapping themes.

***Warm demanders.*** When identifying African American students as involuntary immigrants, it is imperative to highlight traditions, learning styles, and management techniques unique to the culture, which is a tenet of culturally responsive teaching (also known as Culture-



Centered Theory). Culturally responsive teaching is used in conjunction with critical race theory as a means to overcome the institutional racism found in school systems (Wallace & Brand, 2012). Since most pedagogy suits middle-class, White students (Delpit, 1986; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), some educators have chosen to make conscious decisions to acknowledge race (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and teach students using warm demander (Bondy et al., 2013; Ford & Sassi, 2014; Ross et al., 2008; Ware, 2006) practices. A warm demander, recognized in some circles as an “insister,” has characteristics of a pedagogue, an authority figure, and a caregiver (Bondy et al., 2013; Ford & Sassi, 2014; Ross et al., 2008; Ware, 2006). Caregiving is multidimensional, when examined from a Black feminist or womanist perspective, and warm demanding provides another model of care to effectively reach students of color who live in the intersections.

As pedagogue and authority figure, warm demanders give and demand respect from students. A warm demander communicates clear, high expectations and insists that all students reach them (Bondy et al., 2013; Ford & Sassi, 2014; Ross et al., 2008; Ware, 2006). Teachers who act as insisters constantly remind students of proper behavior and expectations, and use consequences as a response to students who fall out of line (Bondy et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2008; Ware, 2006). When disciplining students, warm demanders are lovingly firm, in a manner similar to how African American parents reprimand their children (Ware, 2006). Their classrooms are well-managed and a place where everyone is able to learn.

One does not have to be an African American teacher in order to use warm demander pedagogy. Caucasian teachers, who have been socialized to speak in soft tones, often misinterpret the harsh tone of African American verbal discipline as an attack, whereas Black students attribute it to caring (Thompson, 2004; Ware, 2006). White teachers who have learned

to manage their classrooms in this manner may struggle at first to find their authoritative voice, but eventually find it and gain respect from African American students (Bondy et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2008). Insistence may come intrinsically to Black teachers; regardless of age, White teachers can make a conscious choice to become warm demanders (Bondy et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2008). As classroom teachers are majority middle-class, White women who have different experiences with care, community, and motherhood, the practice of being a warm demander serves as a cross-cultural tool to yield student success.

Outside of classroom management and discipline, insisters carry their authority into the community. In many instances, these educators are members of the communities in which they serve and are revered as pillars (Kunjufu, 2002; Ware, 2006). Some warm demanders even go as far as to educate parents, give parenting tips, and take on a mothering role, which is interpreted by African American students and families as caring (Ware, 2006). Much like an othermother, a warm demander holds stature in the community, is respected, and is committed to the upward plight of students and families.

Caring is also demonstrated in the classroom by making sure students' needs are met and often providing special nurturing (not coddling) for African American male students. Warm demanders find opportunities to connect the curriculum to students' culture, optimally changing the culture of learning (Bondy et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2008; Ware, 2006). In a system that rejects the norms of minority cultures and often sees those on the low end of the achievement gap as deficient, warm demander pedagogy is being used to reshape the broken structure of education by both Black and White teachers (Bondy et al., 2013; Ford & Sassi, 2014). It is imperative that classrooms are inclusive environments, where students' cultures are not only

acknowledged and understood, but also placed in the center and used as connecting points of care.

**Teachers as othermothers.** Within the classroom, othermothers hold high expectations for students and create a warm atmosphere for learning (Case, 1997). Othermothers view education as a means of political clarity—teaching students how to identify oppression and think critically about the world and systems of which they are a part as minorities (Roseboro & Ross, 2009). They are able to use their positions as teachers to work within hegemonic systems (Mathews, 1993) to empower and liberate children by preparing them for life (Grant, 1993; Roseboro & Ross, 2009). These women use their status as an othermother as power, and know how to use care to shape instruction and manage classroom behaviors, where children are disciplined assertively (Noblit, 1993). As othermothers, educators will show care to students by treating them as if they were their biological children. They will be concerned for the welfare and well-being of each individual child.

Furthermore, teachers as othermothers are compelled to lead by service. Servant leadership is a model developed by Greenleaf and furthered by Spears, depicting a leader who is driven to meet the needs of others. Those behaviors consist of conceptualizing, emotional healing, putting followers first, helping followers grow and succeed, behaving ethically (which relates to authentic leadership), empowering, and creating value for the community (Elmore, 2001; Northouse, 2016). While Black female teachers are servant leaders who employ their characteristics, it is important to examine the way they lead from a position of intersectionality (Agosto & Roland, 2018) as both female and Black. For many African American female teachers, servant leadership is ministry; it is a spiritual response to the calling of education (Alston, 2005; Long, 2011; Marina & Fonteneau, 2012). The call to serve is deep-rooted and

leads to a life of self-sacrifice (Long, 2011). Othermothers lead through service as a form of justice (Alston, 2005, 2015), working on the behalf of marginalized students to ensure a quality education for all (Alston, 2015). The othermother leads communally (Jackson, 2009; Long, 2011), watches out for African American students in her building, and serves as an advocate (Robinson & Baber, 2013). While she may not hold formal or traditional leadership titles, her commitment to service, her community, and sense of agency make her a leader in her own right.

Outside of the classroom, Black female educators extend their advocacy for the families and students they serve, despite scrutiny from others (Henry, 1992; Mawhinney, 2011). They will make sure students are fed and clothed, and will go as far as to care about what is happening to the child after school hours. One example of such is the educator Marva Collins, who founded several schools in Chicago and Milwaukee for at-risk, inner-city students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Collins gave of herself unconditionally and saw the role of the mother as a strength instead of an emotional weakness. Anna Julia Cooper serves as another example of a community othermother. In order to further education during segregation, Cooper became president of Frelinghuysen University in Washington, D.C. and created unique ways for working adults to obtain an education, to the point of holding home schools in instructors' homes (Gyant, 1996). Collins, Cooper, and other women demonstrated care and led with deep commitment that continues to be an example for Black female educators today.

Unconditional care can also develop into care-sickness (Mawhinney, 2011; Roseboro & Ross, 2009). Black female educators who operate as othermothers see work as care; they may end up overworking themselves (Roseboro & Ross, 2009) or failing to set proper boundaries in order to allow time and space for self-care (Mawhinney, 2011). This care-sickness can then develop into depressive guilt if the educator feels that she has not done enough (Mawhinney,

2011). Historically, figures in education such as Mary McLeod Bethune and Charlotte Hawkins Brown dedicated their lives to education yet suffered major health problems from overworking (Roseboro & Ross, 2009). The experiences of these educators serve as reminders that Black women are not superhuman, and that all individuals who provide care need to create time and space to also find balance.

While much of the literature focuses on othermothering occurring in urban educational contexts, there are some pieces of research surrounding othermothers at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and in suburban K-12 schools. There appears to be more research about othermothers at PWIs compared to those at suburban districts. Within both of these settings, in addition to the activist and advocate role, othermother educators become “cultural translators and cultural brokers” (Irvine, 1989, p. 57). Not only do they become translators for students, but they help acclimate new families to suburban districts, and provide a sense of family for those who are far from home (Dixson, 2003; Griffin, 2013; Mawhinney, 2011). These othermothers in diverse settings are also able to rise to stature and gain respect from students and staff of all races (Noblit, 1993). Regardless of where she is placed, the othermother is still able to continue the work of advocate and activist while being a pillar to others. The size of the Black community she serves may change, but her commitment level remains the same.

Additionally, the literature is quite dense in describing othermothering from the educators’ perspective. The research describes what othermothers are like in educational settings—classroom, administration, and academic—but does not appear to provide many findings from the students’ perspectives. The voices of the families and communities who benefit from having an othermother present appear to be sparse as well. Demographics in suburban communities have changed, and as the trend shows that Blacks will continue to

populate suburbs at higher rates, the practice of othermothering should be explored within this context.

### **Chapter 3: Method**

#### **Method**

Othermothering is a unique lived experience by both those giving and receiving care. Since it pertains to the lifeworld of African American women, particularly over the age of 40, along with others in the African American community with whom they come in contact, the chosen method for this study is phenomenology (van Manen, 2016). Six suburban districts in a diverse county were targeted; seven participants were selected for the study. The participants took part in shadowing, individual interviews, and a focus group during the spring, summer, and fall semesters. I began with shadowing and individual interviews; the themes that emerged then drove the conversations in the focus group and additional interviews (van Manen, 2016).

The phenomenological approach allowed for reflection on the life and work of the othermother, as well as creating a space for me as a researcher to intertwine my own reflections, as I have benefitted from othermothering and see myself stepping into that role in my own community. Phenomenologists see the researcher as a vital part of the study; this individual should not be detached but should bring his or her experience and beliefs into the research (Groenewald, 2004). Incorporating my voice also utilizes elements of Black feminist autoethnography as I reflect introspectively and make connections to the phenomenon of othermothering as an African American female researcher (Brown, 2012; Griffin, 2012; McClaurin, 2001). These methods drove the research as I sought to understand the following: what is the experience of the suburban othermother; what is her essence; how does she see herself and her responsibility to her community?

### **Phenomenological Approach**

Phenomenological research examines the lives and experiences of individuals around a certain phenomenon or lived event (Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; van Manen, 2016). More of a philosophy than a scientific method (Norlyk & Harder, 2010; van Manen, 2016), phenomenology derived from German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the late 1800s (Embree, 1997; Groenewald, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2011). According to Husserl, phenomenology requires one to make observations about the surrounding world and develop personal reflections (Smith et al., 2011). With this study, the participants were studied in their classrooms and work environments in order for me to make observations of their practice and pedagogy. These close observations allowed me to enter lifeworlds through active participation (van Manen, 2016). The qualitative data were then reflected upon and used to derive themes and further questions.

As a reflective practice, phenomenology is a human science that studies humans and the expressions of their existence (Smith et al., 2011; van Manen, 2016). It differs from natural and behavioral sciences as the goal is to understand life and human phenomena rather than categorize or explain them (van Manen, 2016). Phenomenology studies the essence, or nature, of lived experiences and searches for deeper meaning through reflection and interpretation through methods such as interviewing and observation (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; van Manen, 2016). This study used in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of othermothering. In this instance, in-depth interviews took place with Black female educators who are viewed by school and community members as othermothers. The interviews initially took place both with one-on-one and focus group sessions. Phenomenology allows participants to reflect on memories and intentionality of consciousness (Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011; van



Manen, 2016). In this study, participants described past and present experiences of othermothering, both personally and professionally. Furthermore, the participants of the study were able to describe how othermothering has impacted instructional practices and relationships with others in suburban districts.

### **Black Feminist Autoethnography**

Ethnography is another qualitative inquiry method that analyzes the actions and interactions of a culture (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). It derives from anthropology and qualitative sociology, studying human groups and how cultures are maintained (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As the White male researcher has played a dominant role in ethnographic studies (Brown, 2012), feminist ethnography developed as a means to give voice to the marginalized through reflection and introspection (Brown, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Feminist ethnography builds from feminist standpoint theory, which is comprised of three parts: knowledge is socially situated, marginalized groups ask questions and are more aware of what is going on around them because of their social position, and research should begin with those who are marginalized (Brown, 2012).

Black feminist epistemology builds off of these tenets to create a theory and methodology that center around the experiences and cognitive styles of Black women (Brown, 2012; Griffin, 2012; McClaurin, 2001). It is an amalgamation of many “traditions of women-centered, feminist, African-American, vindicationist, and ‘native’ scholarship that are inherently reflexive and oppositional...that seek to challenge the historical foundations of anthropology” (McClaurin, 2001, p. 60). Pulling from many traditions, Black feminist ethnography then places Black women at the center and uses personal experience as a strength to analyze race, class, and gender (Brown, 2012; Griffin, 2012; McClaurin, 2001). When studying the marginalized, Black women

can use their insider status to critique systems of power and dismantle systems from the margins (Brown, 2012).

Focusing on self, Black feminist autoethnography allows Black feminist researchers to look both inwardly and outwardly to make personal connections to culture (Griffin, 2012; McClaurin, 2001). In this study, I use my position as an African American female to analyze the phenomenon of othermothering in education in the suburbs. Black female suburban educators are the focus of the study, who are marginalized within the profession. Because I have this shared experience, I can reflect on my own practice and interpret the culture with an insider status. Furthermore, my research helps to give voice to a group that is often silenced and overlooked, with the intent to liberate and expand the sense of agency of Black women in education.

### **Personal Biography**

I am an African American female teacher in a diverse suburban district, where I have been employed for nearly a decade. My Bachelor of Science degree is in Elementary Education and English as a Second Language. I also hold a Master of Library and Information Science degree, with a concentration in School Library Media. I have a professional teaching certificate through the state and am certified in seven different content areas. I am an educator in a suburb of a major city and have been with the same district my entire teaching career. I teach 7th grade Science and ESL (English as a Second Language) Science at a middle school in the district.

The art of teaching and othermothering is something I learned from my upbringing. My mother is a retired teacher, my aunt is a retired principal, and my cousin is an assistant principal. As a child, I listened to stories of my mother's students, helped out in her classroom when I could, and watched her give anything she could to help those under her care succeed.

Additionally, I resided in a suburban community where othermothering was present, even as the demographics shifted from majority White to majority Black. The elementary school I attended only had a few African American teachers at the time, and one woman in particular stands out, Mrs. Jefferson (pseudonym). The position of power and respect she gained through the years was quite phenomenal, and to this day, we still have a high regard for her in the community.

**Critical self-narrative.** Upon fellowshipping at my mom's church one Sunday, I decided to stop by the grocery store after service to quickly pick up a few items. The church, along with the grocery store, was in the suburb where I grew up and attended school from 1st to 12th grade. The grocery store was also conveniently placed in a shopping center next to the high school from which I graduated.

When my family first moved to this suburb, they were one of the first few African American families in the city, as the population was primarily Jewish and Chaldean (Iraqi Christians). However, by the time I graduated high school, "White flight" had taken place and the city was primarily African American. It amazed me how quickly things changed over the span of 12 years. Thankfully, the school district adapted to meet the needs of the changing demographic. As more and more African American students came into the school system, we slowly saw more Black and Brown faces in our buildings as teachers, administrators, and support staff. The curriculum evolved as well and proved to be culturally relevant, giving us strong roots in our African American history.

That Sunday as I was pushing my cart through the grocery store, I saw a familiar face talking with a couple of other individuals by the meat section. As I drew closer, I saw that the face looked a little older and the hair slightly grayer, but the voice was still the same. I realized it was first Black teacher I ever encountered in the district I grew up in, Mrs. Jefferson, who

taught in my elementary school and also served as my childhood Girl Scout troop leader. I chased her down, gave her a big hug, and began updating her on my life. It had been years since I had last seen her, yet she still remembered me and details about my life. She gave me words of encouragement, asked about my friends from grade school, and let me know she was proud of me. That small conversation meant the world to me. I watched her make her way through the grocery store and realized I was not the only person to stop her. She could only go so far without another former student, parent, or community member coming up to her to chat.

This encounter with Mrs. Jefferson constantly comes to mind as I think about educators who employ care in the classroom, and specifically Black female teachers who othermother. When I take a look within and examine myself, an African American educator in my mid-30s, I cannot help but see how Black women as othermothers shaped my worldview and definition of culture. It is Black Feminist Care that best helps me to describe my own understanding of culture and cultural lens. In researching the suburban othermothering experience, I cannot help but reflect on my own accounts with this phenomenon, which is why I have chosen this method. This is not only a lived experience of others, but something personal and dear to my own heart, with hopes that it can provide solutions for the disparities that African American students may face in the suburbs and empower Black female educators.

### **Site Selection and Sampling Strategies**

The individuals interviewed for this research met a specific type of criteria, as the phenomenon is specific to African American female teachers over the age of 40 (Case, 1997; James, 1993) who have a sense of stature in a suburban school and/or community (Bass, 2012; Dixson, 2003; Loder, 2005; Morris, 1999; Noblit, 1993). The position of stature was identified through holding leadership roles or positions of authority (both formal and informal) within the

school, district, and/or community (Loder, 2005; Morris, 1999; Noblit, 1993). Additionally, the teacher drives instruction through a social justice/liberation framework (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999, 2002; Kakli, 2011; Knight, 2004; Roberts, 2010; Roseboro & Ross, 2009); advocates for African American students (Dixson, 2003; Kakli, 2011; Mawhinney, 2011; Morris, 1999); and cultivates caring relationships with students and their families (Bass, 2009, 2012; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999, 2002; Case, 1997; Dixson, 2003; Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011; Mawhinney, 2011; Morris, 1999; Noblit, 1993; Roseboro & Ross, 2009). As othermothering is a phenomenon that occurs between Black women and other Black children (Case, 1997; Collins, 2000a, 2005, 2015; Foster, 1993; Guiffida, 2005; Kakli, 2011; James, 1993; Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011; Loder, 2005; Wilson, 2010), the participants are of African descent. Additionally, the districts of the teachers have a racially mixed student population, with African Americans as a minority group, as this study sought to explore the unique lived experience of African American female teachers in diverse suburbs.

Therefore, the participants were selected from a county with a wide array of student ethnicities and racial groups near a major urban city. The county identified is outside of a major metropolitan area in the Midwest, which will be referred to as Maple County. Presently, Maple County is comprised of 28 public school districts and 35 charter schools. Over the past 10 years, Maple County has lost about 15,000 students, with a current student count of approximately 183,724 pupils. The overall student population is majority White (61%); however, over the last decade, there has been an increase of minority students in the county, primarily students of Asian descent, Hispanic students, and students who identify with two or more races. The African American population has remained the same, at approximately 20%. Most of the diversity in the county is within the southern region. There are four districts that are majority African American,

and two that are majority Asian. The remaining 22 districts are majority White.

Six school districts (A, B, C, D, E, and F) in the county were chosen as selection sites for the case study. All of the districts have had a decline in White student population over the past decade. Districts A, C, D, and E have shown an increase in African American students, while Districts B and F have had a decline in African American students. However, District B has had an increase of students who identify with two or more races, along with Hispanic students. District F has had an influx of Asian students, who make up the second largest racial group in the district, after White students.

The participants were identified with the aid of administrators, school communities, and various professional networks. The Diversity Education Specialist (DES) who works for the regional service agency of Maple County helped to provide avenues to search for candidates. The regional service agency functions as an intermediate school district and provides support to local schools, staff, and administrators. The DES organizes the Black Administrators Organization (BAO) for the county, which meets monthly. I attended a meeting to describe my research and gave the profile of an othermother. I then asked members to offer names and email addresses of individuals they feel met the criteria, particularly those who were employed within the county.

Additionally, the DES oversees all of the Black Parent Organizations (BPOs) within Maple County. With the aid of the DES, I contacted BPOs in five districts in the county via email and described the research and the role of an othermother. Much like with the BAO, I asked parents to solicit names of women who they feel met the description of an othermother. The names provided from all networks were then cross-referenced for similarities.

Seven women were recommended through my networking; all were contacted to participate in the study and all graciously agreed to take part. More information about the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

*Othermothering Participants*

Name	Age	District	Type of School	Grade/Subject	Years of Teaching
Bonnie Adams	60	A	High School	Social Studies	28
Zoe Johnson	45	B	High School	Mathematics	22
Gerrie Smith	40	C	High School	Mathematics	13
Jackie Parks	44	D	Middle School	Mathematics	21
Pattie Quinn	43	D	High School	Dance	19
Riley Davis	39	E	High School	Social Studies	14
Natalie White	58	F	Elementary School	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade	37

**Access, Role, Reciprocity, Trust, and Rapport**

Participants were selected through personal request and/or email. It was easy to contact participants, as well as establish trust and rapport, since there was already a sense of comfort and familiarity with some. I had a professional connection to a few participants. However, I did not know a majority of the participants and used my insider status as a Black female educator to connect with them. All were happy to take part in the experience; they felt the research was necessary and worthwhile. Most correspondence occurred via email and over the phone. Since the study was taking place near the end of the school year, the participants asked to be shadowed first, and then interviewed once the school year was over. I honored this request to make the participants feel comfortable and establish a bond. Furthermore, I ensured confidentiality through signed agreements as another way to build trust.

In order to create a comfortable environment, interviews took place at a location convenient to the participant, and focus group sessions occurred over lunch. Meeting with

participants outside of their workplace and in a relaxed setting allowed trust and rapport to develop more naturally. Because I am a Black female educator from a suburban environment, I have a shared insider status as it relates to race, gender, and class (Brown, 2012). This status allowed me to gain access to environments and relationships that are vital to the study and would be more difficult for someone seen as an outsider to obtain (Brown, 2012). Finally, as a thank you for participating in the research, the participants received a \$25 gift card.

### **Ethical and Political Considerations**

To remain ethical, participants have their anonymity protected through the use of pseudonyms. They were also ensured of informed consent prior to interviews. The role of the researcher must be maintained, and a conscious effort must be made on my behalf to fully describe what occurs during the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; van Manen, 2016). The quality of data has the potential to increase because there were better interactions and subjective understandings through participants to whom I knew previously. However, at the same time, it can cause “ethical and political dilemmas, the risk of uncovering potentially damaging knowledge, and struggles with closeness and closure” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 101). This means that because I may be familiar with some of the women professionally, I have positional influence that could uncover information that could cause negative working relationships or environments.

Even so, I must make an effort to remain true to the object being studied (othermothering) and show its full depth (van Manen, 2016). As an African American female, I hold an emic perspective and am so familiar with all of the nuances that I may leave out explanations. However, as Groenewald (2004) explains, in phenomenology, “the researcher cannot be detached from his/her own presuppositions and that the researcher should not pretend



otherwise” (p. 7). Likewise, Black feminist autoethnography uses the insider status as a strength to better understand and interpret the culture and phenomenon (Brown, 2012; Griffin, 2012; McClaurin, 2001). It is imperative during this study that I remain insightful and reflective through the process in order to convey the richness of the object at hand, othermothering (Brown, 2012; Griffin, 2012; McClaurin, 2001; van Manen, 2016). Finally, before beginning the research, the review board of the university had to approve it. This required submitting an online proposal, which also checked for objectivity and subjectivity. Upon review board approval, the study then commenced.

### **Data Collection Methods**

In order to understand the essence of the suburban othermother, data were collected primarily in three ways—through interviews, shadowing, and focus groups. These methods allowed me to focus on the experiences of suburban othermothers, hear their stories, and gain insight into their role in the community. While these methods are common to ethnography (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and phenomenology (van Manen, 2016), I approached them with a Black feminist lens, placing the essence and experiences of African American female teachers at the center (Brown, 2012; Griffin, 2012; McClaurin, 2001).

**Interviews.** The data for the in-depth, one-on-one interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The participants indicated approval of informed consent in order to participate. The audio recordings were saved on my personal computer, with the intent of future playback. The in-depth interviews consisted of four open-ended questions to usher more of a conversation and less of a formal interview (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and were as follows:

1. Tell me about your educational career/history. How did you get where you are today?

2. Describe your interactions with parents and families. How would you describe your role in the community?
3. Talk to me about care. What does it mean to show care to students?
4. Help me understand what makes a good school leader. What is the difference between formal and informal leadership in a school? Where do you see yourself in these positions of formal/informal leadership and authority?

Phenomenological interviewing allowed for the lived experiences to be shared, but also created a space for me, the researcher, to connect my own personal experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; van Manen, 2016). As an African American female teacher, I have lived and experienced othermothering in a variety of ways, which enabled me to shape and guide the interview process with an insider's perspective (Brown, 2012; Griffin, 2012; McClaurin, 2001).

**Shadowing.** Shadowing let me immerse myself in each teacher's domain, to get a close observation (van Manen, 2016) of her othermothering experience. My Black feminist perspective enabled me to understand certain social cues and to have a heightened awareness of daily interactions (Brown, 2012; Griffin, 2012; McClaurin, 2001). All classroom observations were recorded in a journal/log. Data were recorded both as they happened and after the observation session (van Manen, 2016). Anecdotes were recorded in this manner, as well as revisited after reflection, for record-keeping purposes and to discover patterns (van Manen, 2016).

**Focus groups.** After recording the previous personal experiences and reflecting on and analyzing the data, I allowed the themes that emerged to guide a focus group session (Saldaña, 2009; van Manen, 2016). The focus group session was relaxed and informal, so that the participants felt comfortable relaying their experiences with each other (van Manen, 2016).

Much like the interviews, the focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants. I used my insider status as an African American female to pay attention to nuances, subtleties, and phrases as the participants dialogued with one another (Brown, 2012; Griffin, 2012; McClaurin, 2001). The focus group questions were as follows:

1. Leadership recap
  - a. How do you define leadership?
  - b. Describe leadership as an African American woman in your building.
  - c. Are you an informal or formal leader? How?
  - d. Describe value of leadership between district and professional world.
2. Respect
  - a. Define respect.
  - b. Do you feel respected by (students, district, parents)? Why or why not?
  - c. What makes you feel respected?
  - d. Define respect.
  - e. How has respect changed for you over the years?
3. Purpose
  - a. Why are you employed where you are?
  - b. Why do you stay?
4. Self-care
  - a. Define self-care.
5. What do you want to be remembered for? Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
6. Is there anything I haven't asked that you want to know?

After the focus group was transcribed, an additional theme around spirituality was noted.

Participants were contacted in the fall for a short phone interview (participants gave permission to audio record the conversation). The participants were asked to explain how spirituality/faith impacted their practice and interactions with staff and students.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Coding took place in two cycles (Saldaña, 2009). The purpose of the first cycle was to let themes emerge (van Manen, 2016), with heavy emphasis on descriptive and In Vivo coding. Descriptive coding summarized what was seen and heard during the data collection (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2009). In Vivo coding focused more on the language of the participants and searched for patterns of speech (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2009). The transcriptions were coded by hand in the first cycle. The audio recordings were played back to listen to conversations and establish a better understanding of tone. The observations logged in the journal were read and coded for themes and emerging patterns (van Manen, 2016).

The second cycle of coding occurred to analyze the themes (Saldaña, 2009). Once themes were analyzed, they were then organized in a report using qualitative analysis software, as shown in Table 2. Upon analyzing the data, I looked for connections to the initial research questions—what is the experience of the suburban othermother; what is her essence; how does she see herself and her responsibility to her community?

**Analysis.** Initially, themes emerged around leadership, respect, purpose, and self-care. As these themes were explored further, the broader categories developed—suburban othermothers are grounded, purpose-driven, and nurturing servant-leaders. Twenty-four documents were coded—observation notes, interviews, and focus group transcripts. Within these artifacts, nurturing servant-leader had the most references, followed by grounded. Purpose-driven had the least number of references. Each theme had subcategories as well. The

theme grounded included: confidence, family ties, self-care, and spirituality. Purpose-driven had the least number of subcategories: advocate and role model. Finally, nurturing servant-leader had four subcategories: accepting, caring and relational, responsible for development, and student-centered. These references can be seen in more detail in Table 2.

Table 2

*Othermothering References*

	Bonnie	Gerrie	Jackie	Natalie	Pattie	Riley	Zoe	Total
Grounded	49	22	44	50	40	41	28	274
Confidence	20	1	2	4	8	13	11	5
Family Ties	11	6	11	15	20	11	3	77
Self Care	10	11	19	16	4	8	10	78
Spirituality	7	3	10	11	6	8	4	49
Purpose Driven	22	6	21	31	29	15	17	141
Advocate	10	2	9	23	16	5	5	70
Role Model	9	2	6	5	9	9	6	46
Nurturing Servant-Leader	38	35	29	50	101	41	27	321
Accepting	3	1	3	5	5	6	1	24
Caring and Relational	7	12	15	14	26	10	14	98
Responsible for Development	8	7	4	11	37	8	4	79
Student Centered	5	5	7	10	28	8	5	68
Individual Total	199	113	180	245	301	183	135	

When examining the data table, note that the totals of the three major themes do not equal the total of references in the subcategories. This is because some references went directly into one of the broader themes instead of the subcategories. Additionally, some references were coded into more than one theme or subcategory. Furthermore, some participants had more interactions than others, which may also have skewed the data. For example, Pattie had an additional half-day observation, and Bonnie and Riley included their extracurricular activities as extended time in their observation. Gerrie had a family emergency and could not make the focus group, so the questions that were asked during the focus group were done individually on a different day.

Looking at overall individual reference totals, Pattie, Natalie, and Bonnie had the highest number of references. One must still take into account that Pattie had more interactions than the other participants. However, it is important to note that Natalie and Bonnie have the highest number of years in education out of all of the seven participants. Gerrie had the least number of references; however, she also missed out on the dynamics of a focus group conversation. Her totals may have differed if she had been part of the whole group. Zoe's reference totals were the second lowest, even though she has been in education for over 20 years. However, at the time of the study, it was her first school year in District B, so she did not have as much experience to refer to with that set of students, parents, and community, compared to where she had worked previously.

**Grounded.** Within the category of grounded, Natalie and Bonnie had the highest references, followed by Jackie. Unsurprisingly, Natalie and Bonnie both have the most years in education. Additionally, they both reside in the community in which they teach, and their adult children matriculated through the school district as well. Gerrie and Zoe had the lowest number of references overall in this category; something worth mentioning again is that this was Zoe's first year in the district in which she teaches. However, like Natalie and Bonnie, Gerrie's son attends her school and district.

The subcategory references seemed to align with who the participants presented themselves to be. Bonnie rated the highest in confidence; she spoke often of how her father instilled confidence in her and how she applied it to job tenure. Pattie had the most references around family ties; the dance company operates as a family unit, she is close with the parents of the students in the company, and she spoke often about her own children. Jackie and Natalie both had higher references than others in the self-care subcategory; both women have had to deal

with major health challenges and have learned the importance of taking care of themselves on the job. Within spirituality, all of the women shared that spirituality was important to them. Jackie and Natalie both had the most references, but not by much. Yet, many of the women connected their spirituality to their purpose for being an educator.

**Purpose-driven.** Natalie also had the most references in the general category of purpose-driven, as well as the subcategory of advocate. Her work within the community and desire to be an advocate were common threads that followed her in the observation, interviews, and focus group. Pattie and Bonnie were close as well with the number of references for this category. Both of these teachers spoke freely about how the work they did was for a reason, but also to be a role model for students of color in a suburban context. All three women had previously taught in urban school districts before their current place of employment, yet each believed they were in the suburbs for a reason, specifically to reach African American children.

The number of references for role model was low overall, compared to other themes and subcategories. However, Bonnie, Pattie, and Riley all had the same number of references in this category. Something that all three women had in common was that they conducted extracurricular activities that centered around character development. Bonnie and Riley both ran groups for girls; Bonnie's group was specifically for girls of color. Pattie worked with the dance company after school, outside of her in-school instruction, and said that she felt she could use dance education as a means to teach and model life skills to students. For Pattie, her job was much bigger than dance.

**Nurturing servant-leader.** While Natalie had the most references in the other two themes, Pattie had the most references in nurturing servant-leader, along with three of the four subcategories. She was followed by Natalie and Riley. Again, Pattie had more observations

than the other participants, so that may have influenced the number of references. However, Pattie's speech was filled with nuances about serving children and that her job was not about her, but the needs of students. From her parking lot prayers to the way that she mentored student-teachers, Pattie focused on the young people in front of her. She had an ability to put her own needs aside and also showed a sense of responsibility for development. Natalie and Riley, while student-centered, had higher emphasis on their ability to lead. Both ladies wore several hats within their districts in regards to leadership.

In terms of being caring and relational, Jackie, Natalie, Zoe, and Gerrie had the next highest references, after Pattie. They each showed care in their own way. Jackie and Zoe showed more of a tough love, but at the same time, made sure to connect with each of their students and share parts of their lives. Natalie celebrated other cultures and remained in contact with many of her former students into their adult lives. Gerrie had a classroom that was always open and accessible. While different, each of these individuals used her strengths to develop caring relationships with students.

### **Procedures to Address Trustworthiness and Credibility**

From phenomenological and ethnographic perspectives, one limitation in this study is my experience as an African American female educator who has grown up with many examples of othermothering. However, Black feminist autoethnography views this limitation as a strength of the study, as it provides access and an insider's perspective (Brown, 2012; Griffin, 2012; McClaurin, 2001). Another limitation is my familiarity with some of the participants to whom I had encountered previously through the profession. I have to explain things from an outsider's perspective in order to give a full account of the phenomenon. Phenomenology calls for thoughtfulness, reflection, writing, and rewriting (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; van Manen,



2016). As I made my observations and analyzed data, I had to be aware of my own subjectivity and make an effort to fully explain the phenomena (van Manen, 2016). These limitations were also corrected by having colleagues review and critique my work individually and in group settings.

## Chapter 4: Results and Data Analysis

### Results and Data Analysis

In triangulating the data from the observations, interviews, and focus group, three themes were congruent. At the first round of coding, many themes emerged—confidence, family ties, self-care, spirituality, advocate, role model, accepting, caring, relational, responsible for development, and student-centered. However, some of these themes had connections and were enveloped under broader categories to address the original research questions: *What is the experience of the suburban othermother? What is her essence? How does she see herself and her responsibility to her community?* As a result, the data trends showed that suburban othermothers are grounded, purpose-driven, and nurturing-servant leaders.

For the purposes of this study, the word “grounded” will refer to the participant’s foundation and sense of security. Being grounded can come in a variety of ways and look different for each participant. For some participants, being grounded was demonstrated through having roots in the community, by either being a resident, having children attending the school system, or simply being a teacher at the school for many years. Another form of grounding came through familial ties—be they relationships built with families in the school community or her own ties to her immediate and extended family. Grounded also encapsulated self-security, or her ability to be confident and demand respect, and the way she carried herself. Finally, being grounded included her ability to take care of herself, or exhibit self-care, along with her spiritual or religious ties.

Out of the grounded theme, “purpose-driven” emerged next. Purpose-driven refers to what causes the othermother to act the way that she does and her source of motivation. She cannot have a sense of purpose without a firm grounding or foundation. Like the theme grounded, purpose-driven has multiple facets. Purpose-driven is defined by the participant’s reason for becoming a teacher and/or continuing with her work. Additionally, she has a desire to advocate for students of color, whether formally through committee work or informally by speaking up during meetings. Last, purpose-driven includes her ability to be a positive role model for students, families, and/or staff members. Her purpose-driven actions span beyond the walls of her classroom and occur at larger levels through the district and community.

Finally, the theme “nurturing servant-leader” includes the participant’s leadership style, yet goes beyond the traditional model of servant-leadership to include the classroom. Her servant-leadership is influenced and stems from her purpose-driven actions and grounded foundation. As a servant-leader, she has a desire to put a young person’s needs above her own and create a student-centered atmosphere. She is accepting and relational, yet the way that she does this may differ from another. She also shows care in her own way and demonstrates a sense of responsibility through teachings (some may be more didactical or conservative than others). She is committed to the development of young people and is a leader in her environment, either formally or informally.

In this chapter, a narrative will be presented of each participant. The participants and their background information are also included in Table 2. The data were built upon and triangulated from the data sets. The quotes in this section were taken directly from transcripts and notes from the observations, interviews, and focus group. Where quotation marks are used,

the participants are being directly quoted. Finally, this chapter will conclude with an analysis of the data.

### **Teacher Narratives**

At the conclusion of the focus group, one of the participants asked me what did I notice about each of the participants in relation to a common theme. I briefly talked about some of the themes that were addressed during the focus group discussion, and then I spoke to them about what really resonated with me. Within each participant, I either saw a piece of myself or was reminded of someone in my family. I saw the multiplicity of Black women, and the literature rang true for me. While indeed we share commonalities as African American women, our lived experiences and personalities are different, which only creates richer, deeper truths about our journey. As I paint a picture of each participant, I hope to capture this essence within each narrative.

**Bonnie Adams.** After checking into the high school, Bonnie was called down to the office to escort me to class. I found myself face to face with a tall, brown-skinned woman with a gigantic Afro and kind, light-brown eyes. “So you decided to join us today,” she said with a straight face before introducing herself and taking me back to her room. As we made our way through the crowded hallways, she jokingly pushed some kids out of the way and greeted others. I was surprised at the school demographics; for many years, District A had been known for being primarily White. Although the school is still majority-White, there has been a decrease of the White population and an increase in African American and Latinx students. According to Bonnie, the demographics changed as the district opened enrollment to the entire county a few years ago. Many African American and Latinx students came from a nearby large urban district in hopes of a better education. While Bonnie seemed happy about having more students of color,

she said that her other colleagues had not been thrilled. She is the only full-time African American teacher in her building. The choir teacher is an African American male, but only works at the high school part-time as he teaches choir at the middle school as well. In the main office, the guidance counselor and the assistant principal are also African American.

At the time of the study, Bonnie had been in education for 28 years and was 60 years of age. Education was a second career for her; initially, she was in the business sector but changed careers after getting married and having children. She taught adult education and worked on becoming certified. Eventually she became a high school marketing and business education teacher. She worked in one school for 5 years, and then has been at her current school for 18 years. Bonnie has two adult daughters who both attended the high school where she works. The eldest was a sophomore when she started working there and was okay with her mother being employed at the school when Bonnie first started. Over time, after going through a series of administrators, she had been moved out of business and into the social studies department as an economics, civics, and sociology teacher. While happy to serve as an educator, these participants were not necessarily Bonnie's first love, compared to marketing and business. In addition to teaching, she served as a union representative for the building and was on the bargaining team. She is also an advisor for the class of 2020 and has plans to retire the year they graduate. Finally, she leads a group for young women of color that focuses on self-esteem and character development.

When we got to her classroom, students had already started coming in and were walking to their seats. The classroom was an interior room, with no windows. A few social studies posters were on the walls, and a lamp sat in the back corner. The desks were in traditional rows. "I see nobody read the board," she said dryly. The instructions on the board told students to pick

up three handouts at the door. The students scampered over to the table and retrieved the worksheets for the period. As the hour progressed, the students watched a video, took notes, and then completed their work, with the option of working with a peer. As the students worked, Bonnie walked around the room, checked in with students, and took care of administrative tasks at her desk.

With three subjects to teach, her format remained mostly the same each hour—video, notes/lecture, and then time for work completion. However, the day was broken up by an advisory period in a common learning area where Bonnie supervised students in quiet study with two other teachers. She used the time to catch up on grading as she had been out for a few days at conferences, and then to do union negotiations as a member of the bargaining team. Her sociology class also broke the norm as there were only three students left in the class; the rest were seniors and were done for the school year during the time of my observation. Bonnie referred to the class as her “second prep hour” because of the low attendance numbers. The students in that class were supposed to work on a final group project while she graded papers. Every once in a while, the students would ask her questions (some about school and others off-task) and her first reply would be a sharp, “I told you this was my second prep hour!” The students would simply laugh and continue with their inquiries, and Bonnie would engage with them with a soft smile, but then get back to work. Throughout the day, Bonnie’s laid-back style and a subtle sense of humor shaped her classroom, yet it appeared that she had the students’ respect, and a rapport had been built through her approachability and ability to be relational.

***Grounded.*** As a long-standing member and resident of her school community, Bonnie is grounded in various ways. During my observation of her, the first thing I noticed about her was how confidently she stood in her skin and hair, in a very White community. She later mentioned

to me during our interview that she has always proudly worn her hair in an Afro or in natural styles. As an Economics teacher, she has done supply and demand lessons about Madame CJ Walker and brought in Black hair care products for all her students to see, but also to learn about Black culture. She proudly told us during the focus group:

The White people were amazed. The Black kids acted like they were a little embarrassed. But the White kids were all in, and some of my White colleagues walked by my door and were standing in the door, trying to hear this lecture...

Bonnie knows that she stands out as a lone teacher of color in her building and among the residents in the suburb. At the same time, because she and her family have been a part of the community for decades, she has gained their respect. During the observation, interview, and focus group, Bonnie talked about how she has remained employed within the district, even when an administrator was in place who was purposely terminating African American staff members from employment.

[The administrator] finally just picked on me to the point where I wasn't going to take it no more, I went to the superintendent on him. I said, "Here's what's going to happen. Either you are going to get [the administrator] in check or I'm going to go to the NAACP. I'm going to go to the ACLU, and we're going to have a problem. If you noticed, he's fired all the Black teachers or he's gotten them to quit. I'm here, I'm not going anywhere. I'm a member of this community, I'm a respected member of this community. My neighbors, they come to me with problems that they want you to know about, so we aren't going to deal with [being picked on]." The next thing I knew, the guy backed off. I don't know what the superintendent said to him, but he backed off.

Bonnie also said that her father instilled confidence in her—to stand up for herself and not let anyone walk over her. This attitude impacted how she talked with students in her class. Each hour, she gave clear directions to students and remained firm about reinforcing them. She walked around the room as students worked on assignments and asserted herself as students tried to get out of doing work or break school rules, such as no cellphone usage. “I’m not going to keep asking about that,” she mentioned to a student who kept trying to violate the same rule during third hour Civics, “I’m not in the mood.”

Another trait that has been instilled in Bonnie is her faith in God. Bonnie proudly identifies as a Christian and is quite active in her church, which is located in a nearby suburb that is primarily African American. Her relationship with God is what she says keeps her grounded and allows her to find joy. During the focus group, she said the reason she has remained at her school for so long is because she believes that God has called her there.

I say God put me there because my application was only half filled out when I got a call. Every time someone’s messed with me, they end up leaving and I’m still there...so I always say that God put me there for a reason and to help “our” kids. I mean our African American kids.

Her faith in God is what influences her sense of purpose.

**Purpose.** When Bonnie first started teaching at her high school, her eldest daughter was enrolled there as a sophomore. Initially, Bonnie saw her mission to be an advocate and role model for her daughter’s Black peers.

Well, I started because I was trying to get the Black kids I knew who had grown [up] with my kids and that I knew. I was trying to make sure they had someone, a safe environment, someone they could talk to as they were going through.



Not only was she intent about looking out for students but making connections with Black families as well.

The Black families they look for me...especially if there's a problem, [they'll say] "How do I handle this? What's going on?" And we had a few new [Black families] to the district this week, and I was talking to them. And I said, "Well, you know we have an African American family network. You should hook up with that."

Bonnie's advocacy also led her to start a club for African American female students, focused on self-esteem and character development. Initially, she wanted to go with a club that is known nationally and has formal memberships, but it was too expensive. So with the help of the guidance counselor and assistant principal, who are also Black, she formed the club that currently exists. During the interview, she said:

[W]e do things that develop relationships. We invite outside speakers to speak to the girls about their experiences, women of color who are successful in their chosen careers. I actually got a couple of ladies who want to come speak to them once this year starts up. A pharmacist and an engineer...they want to come and talk to them. But our objective is to make them to be proud of who they are, know that they can stand up to anybody, but know how to do it in a correct way. So we try to teach them there's a correct way to do things.

Since the inception of the club, which meets weekly after school, staff have noticed significant changes in behavior with Black female students who are members.

The teachers are noticing changes in the kids too. The ones that used to roll their eyes and cuss them out, now they step back and they count to ten. And they'll come talk to me before they do that. So there's a lot of changes there....

While visiting the school, I had an opportunity to talk with a member during the advisory period and sit in on a club meeting after school. It was evident to me that the students had gleaned a lot from the organization, from my one-on-one conversation with the student in advisory, and especially as the group took time to do a year-end reflection. During the meeting, the girls sat in a circle and each took turns talking about positive ways they had changed as a result of being in the program, and a memory from the school year that was important to them. The three advisors spoke as well, discussing how they watched the group mesh together and also grow in character. Then the seniors gave words of wisdom to the group, pictures were taken, and some tears were shed, but lots of hugs were given.

Within the focus group for the study, the participants were asked what they wanted to be remembered for. Bonnie's response tied back to her purpose and spoke to how she served and developed relationships with her students.

I want to be remembered for...the changes that I have effected in the lives in some of our Black, or African American students. I want to be remembered for putting a mark on the school...letting them know that there was a Black teacher there, who cared.

For Bonnie, her purpose is what led her to demonstrate care to all students, and especially African American students. "I always try to treat people...I try to treat the children like they're my children, regardless of who they are...Black, White, purple, brown."

***Nurturing servant-leader.*** While observing Bonnie in her classroom, I noticed her sense of rapport with students. Although she was firm and grounded in her directions to students, she made time to walk throughout the room and talk with students. A phrase I heard repeated quietly to individual students at various points during the day was "we need to have a conversation." Later during our time together, Bonnie disclosed that she says that to students when they seem to

be struggling academically, emotionally, or socially. She said she will meet with them individually later on and give students a chance to talk privately about what is going on with them and create a plan to get back on track.

Not only do students confide in her, but staff do as well. As the union representative for her building, staff come to her with concerns and questions regarding their contract. When I observed Bonnie in her classroom, she had just returned after being gone for several days to be part of the bargaining team. Contract negotiations were ending and she was called upon to help with the bargaining process. During the interview, Bonnie said that she got involved with union leadership because of the rapport she had with one of her coworkers, who happened to be the union president. When asked if she saw herself as a formal or an informal leader, Bonnie said that she felt she was an informal leader because “I really don't look for leadership positions. They manage to find me.” She went on to say how she had been recruited by the district to be on a planning committee for 2020, where they are trying to implement changes with the school climate and culture.

Bonnie defines a leader as someone who can bring people together “because they find that there's more power and strength in numbers when people work together.” She also believes a leader should lead by example. I can see this in how she leads her girls group and even advises her class board. She partners with students and staff and works as a team. Her collaborative efforts stick out, in addition to being grounded, and even her administration has noticed. Her principal once told her, “I recommended you because I know you won't do things just because it's the norm. You'll do things because it's the right thing. And if you don't think it's right, you're gonna stand up for it.” She is a faithful and loyal employee who has remained in her building and district for nearly two decades despite racial challenges. In her own way, she is a

strong, quiet leader who told me she prefers to stay under the radar, yet has impacted students and staff through her advisory positions, as a union leader and climate and culture leader, and as a woman of color.

**Zoe Johnson.** When I arrived at Zoe's high school, I was in shock. I knew her school was in a highly affluent suburb, but I was unaware that the school was newly constructed. District B had recently merged two high schools by creating one larger one. The new building resembled a shiny, fancy, two-story shopping mall—instead of a cafeteria, the students had a food court and various snack stations in every corner of the building. The classrooms had slidable glass doors and glass walls that allowed you to see inside. The hallways had lounge areas with couches and comfy chairs. There were lockers, but it seemed as if very few students used them. During class time, it was not uncommon to see students gathered in the common areas of the hallways, talking, working on assignments together or on their electronic devices. The students appeared to have a lot of privilege, freedom, and autonomy, and everything seemed to be centered around them.

Zoe was at the end of her first year at the high school in District B as a math teacher, but was completing her 22nd year in education. She was 45 years old at the time of the study, with one son who is elementary-aged. She has taught math in urban districts, rural areas, and parochial schools, both in and out of the state. She believes that each school she has gone to was for a specific purpose or assignment and is open to change. While the majority of the teachers in this study had remained in their school and/or district for the duration of their career, Zoe was different in that she had been in so many school settings. Additionally, she was the only teacher in the study who had not been in her current district for more than 10 years. She was considered for the study because she came highly recommended from several sources around the county.

Zoe is a dark-skinned woman with a polished complexion and straight hair. She is small in stature and extroverted, with a bright smile and a booming voice. She had no problems asserting herself, telling me or her co-workers her true thoughts about her working conditions, and even admitted needing help from God to control her quick-witted tongue. The school operated on a block schedule, so I sat through two hour-and-a-half classes with her and spent her prep time with her. Zoe spent part of her class period teaching, and then the other half allowing students to work. Both while teaching and helping students she had quick comebacks to student remarks, but always said it with a smile. In the words of my cousin, Zoe knew how to “throw shade” and be what we call “nice-nasty.”

***Grounded.*** Zoe’s sense of being grounded was evident as I observed her assertiveness. Even as a new employee in her district and building, she was not afraid to speak her mind and be her authentic self. During her prep hour, she gave me a brief tour of the facility. We passed several students in the hallway, as many students were using the common areas to study and/or socialize. She made sure to stop and speak to students she knew, and taught them how to introduce themselves to me, her guest. At least two times she told students that we passed to make sure they said hello to me too. Zoe’s assertiveness carried into her classroom as well. The majority of the students came from affluent, privileged backgrounds and were used to getting their way. While administering a unit quiz, a student showed up significantly late and tried to negotiate the terms of the exam. Unmoved, Zoe stuck to the policy for assessment despite the student’s various attempts to let him take it even though he was late. Incidents like this seemed to occur often, through the various stories Zoe told during her interview and focus group session. For example:

Like the last day of school, [a student said], “Um, um, Mrs. Johnson, I wanna talk to you about my grade.” As I’m eating my bagel on my prep hour, [I replied], “Yes, what’s wrong with your grade?” [She continued], “Well, you know, I worked really, really hard and I did well on my final, and I feel that I should have an A.” [I responded], “I feel I should be a trophy wife with 25 million in the bank, but here I am.” [Crying, she said], “It’s not gonna be okay.” “Yes it is,” [I said]. “Go wash your face. Anything else you need?”

This self-confidence trickled into how Zoe interacted with her coworkers, whom, in summary, she felt to be nosy and judgmental. Being new, Zoe felt that her coworkers were trying to assess her worthiness to teach at the school by constantly questioning her educational background and trying to figure out her personal life, which she mentioned during the observation, interview, and focus group. Not only would Zoe refuse to answer their questions, but she also demanded respect from them.

I’m walking to my classroom and I’m on the phone because I don’t have any kids that hour, and [my coworker] yelled out something to me. I turned around and I can admit I was in my feelings that day, and I whipped my head so quick and I gave her that look, and I turned my head back and I kept talking on the phone. And I put my stuff down and...my friend’s like “[Zoe], just calm down.” I’m like, “[She] don’t know who she’s talking to.” And I had to like, you know, pull myself together. So I walked back to the office and I was like, “First of all...” So then we exchanged, and I have to admit I wasn’t hostile, I didn’t have my hands going or anything like that...but because [she] didn’t like my response, [she] felt intimidated by what I said. [My coworkers sided with her

saying], “She was upset, she was this.” And I said, “My feathers aren’t ruffled.” I said, “You asked me a question. I answered it. End of the story.”

At the beginning of the school year, Zoe felt as though she had to be perfect in order to be accepted by the students, families, and staff at her school. However, holding such standards led to a lot of feelings of stress. Additionally, Zoe moved between six different classrooms and was carrying all of the materials she normally would house in a classroom on a cart. The stress combined with pushing the cart led to a lot of sleeplessness and back problems; Zoe eventually had to visit a chiropractor. During our interview, she disclosed that she had never experienced that amount of stress before:

[I]nitially for me I thought that I had to be the [District B] version of myself, whatever preconceived notion that I had, and that in itself was stressing me. I thought I needed to be this certain level of perfection.... And then one day [Zoe Johnson] showed up and then that was it. She never went back in. And then that was it and ever since then I’ve been okay.

Once she stopped feeling like she had to measure up to unspoken standards, Zoe literally put fewer items in her cart and began to relax.

Despite fighting feelings like proving herself to others, Zoe believed that she was called to be at her particular school. She relies on self-care to keep her grounded, which she disclosed during the focus group session, which includes happy hour with friends, time to herself, vacations, and her faith in God. She even connects with a coworker by doing meditations together each morning. Also, she keeps a Bible in desk drawer for encouragement, and prays over her classroom before the school year begins. She prays each morning and through an interview, I learned that she feels that God has led her to every school where she has taught. For

years she had wanted to work in this particular school district, and she feels that God opened up the opportunity for her to be employed there.

**Purpose.** Zoe's sense of spirituality not only grounds her but gives her purpose. Her career has been driven by what one of her undergraduate professors once taught her. During an interview, she stated:

I honestly believe that God has placed me in every district, every school that I've ever needed to be in for whatever reason. I also believe that, one of my professors told me this a long time ago...when you meet someone, either it's for you to teach them something or for them to teach you something. I also believe that as well. So with that being said, I believe that every student I've ever had, even if they had difficult behavior to manage, or if I just ended up still remaining in touch with them after they graduated. I'm like, "I needed to be their teacher for whatever reason. Whether it be to give them some kind words, whether it be to stay on their neck, who knows.

Zoe believes that each student she comes across has been brought into her life for a specific purpose.

Even though Zoe has moved around to different schools and districts, she still remains in touch with former students. She reflected on her impact during an interview:

I think about a student I call my work son I had in [my old district]. I don't know why we just clicked when he was in the tenth grade, but we just did. Come to find out he shared a portion, just the tip of the iceberg of his life, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, I need to do what I can to help this kid." As he progressed through high school, I made sure I stayed up on him as far as his grades. Made sure I stayed on top of him as far as taking the SAT. I acted like I was his counselor when I was trying to call [colleges] to get some



information for him. I did his FAFSA, everything. He was able to get into college or whatever, so I know that at that point in his life, I needed to be his teacher to help him through that rough patch.

Zoe knew that she was supposed to help this student as part of her assignment from God and did what she could for him, even after he was no longer in her classroom.

Zoe also spoke about her purpose to be a role-model during our focus group:

I'm glad that I was able to be there because...I had like a couple set of [Black] twins, and I'm thinking, "I'm probably the only Black teacher y'all have ever had." And I'm like, "Now you're about to go to college, and I'm quite sure you won't have one [Black educator] in college." So I like the fact that you can say one time in your life, "I had a Black teacher. She checked the [mess] out of me, but she taught me at the same time."

While finishing up Zoe's observation, I had an opportunity to meet the twin girls she referenced during the focus group. They are part of the small African American population at the school, and their mom happens to be the Assistant Principal. They stopped by Zoe's room after school to say hello and talk. One twin pointed out that she and Zoe were both wearing the same luxury-brand clothing and seemed happy about it. "Hey Ms. Johnson! We both got on Burberry today!" These types of connections were important to Zoe, and also helped her develop relationships with all students, especially African American students.

***Nurturing servant-leader.*** Zoe's ability to connect with students was evident as we walked through the halls. Students felt comfortable talking to her and reaching out. Even in the classroom, students freely approached her desk for extra help and clarification during their quiz. She said, though, at times some students get too comfortable, and she has to remind them to show respect, as indicated in the focus group:

But you're right, the level of I guess respect is different. And they even feel okay calling someone by their first name, because I had one kid for a semester who said, "What if I call you Zoe?" I said, "Zoe's gonna answer you and Zoe's gonna make you cry. So you better think twice about what you need to ask me." They think that it's okay to blur those lines...

Zoe not only drew the lines for a relationship, but also stood firm in her sense of responsibility to teach students how to interact properly with adults. However, she recollected positive interactions with students as well.

During class, the students open up to her about their lives, and she uses opportunities to teach her majority-White students about elements of Black culture such as hair or cultural traditions and celebrations.

[We] have that relationship, like as the school year progressed, we were talking about like, she's like, "Oh, Mrs. Johnson, why don't you color your hair?" I'm like, "Oh, I used to have it blonde, but you know it gets too dry." Well, she was like, "My hair doesn't get dry when I put blonde." I said, "Black hair" (points to the brown side of her hand), "white hair" (points to the inside of her hand).

The students enjoy sharing their experiences with Zoe as well. She recounted about a student who left for Morocco for a Bat Mitzvah during our focus group.

And now our running joke is like at the end of the school year...so we were talking one day, and he was saying about how, "Oh, Mrs. Johnson, the best fried chicken I've ever had in Belize." I'm like, "Uh-uh." I said, "The best fried chicken," I said. "You need to go somewhere on Six Mile Road and get some fried chicken." And one of my other Black students, she's like, "Oh, yeah, Mrs. Johnson, have you ever been to so-and-so, and

so-and-so?” So I like that as they get to kind of know you, you can kind of develop that relationship...

These interactions show that although it has taken some time, Zoe and the students have become accepting one another and developed a relationship.

**Gerrie Smith.** Gerrie’s high school shared a campus with the only middle school in the district. District C is part of a small, working-class suburb in the county. Over the years, the district has had a rise in their Latinx population; many immigrants from El Salvador have chosen to reside in the suburb. Additionally, the district has open enrollment, so African Americans from a nearby suburb have begun to come over as well. The suburb has a small-town feel that trickles down into the district and through the schools. Everyone seems to know everyone and have relationships with each other. Even as I came into the school, the office staff already knew who I was and eagerly helped me get situated (this was not the case at every building). On my way to Gerrie’s room, students knew I was visiting for the day and helped me find her class.

Gerrie taught geometry to sophomores for five periods in the day. She repeated the same lesson each hour when I observed her. The class started with a warm-up, and then the students were given time to complete their study guide for an upcoming final exam. Gerrie walked around the room each hour helping students, redirecting others, and passing out notecards for students to write down formulas for the final. Throughout the day, students would pop in to her class just to say hi or to speak to other students. She said this is a common practice with all students in the building; because the school is so small, the youth feel comfortable popping in and out of other teachers’ rooms.

During the time of the study, Gerrie was in her 13th year of teaching and 40 years old. Initially, she went to college for bio pre-med, but started subbing when she graduated and fell

into teaching. She became alternatively certified in math and science, and started working in a large urban district in a nearby county as a biology teacher. After the recession hit and there were issues with pay, she left that district for a smaller urban district as a math teacher.

However, after facing layoff, she applied to her current district, where she had been employed for 10 years. Initially, she started out at the middle school, but has been teaching high school math and science for 9 years. She is married with two sons, and her eldest attends the school as well. At the time of the study, her sons were 16 and 2. Many of the students refer to her as “Mom” or “Mama Smith.” She is a light-skinned woman who is short-statured with a self-described “happy go-lucky” disposition. Gerrie had a warm smile and gentle laugh, and was easy to talk to. Her openness and positivity allowed me to see why so many students seemed comfortable around her.

***Grounded.*** In later conversations with Gerrie, I learned that her faith is what guides who she is as a person and her relationship with students. She believes that being kind, joyous, and nurturing are traits she feels she should model for the students because her faith compels her. These traits were highly observable when I shadowed Gerrie in her classroom. Gerrie’s first hour had many special education students, with two paraprofessionals. Some of the students had high needs, yet she took her time to walk the aisles and serviced all students. A few other high-needs special education students came later on in the day as well, and Gerrie’s demeanor stayed the same. As she saw students giving up on their study guide or expressing that they did not understand a part of it, she would either sit with them to work through problems, or invite students to come sit together at a table in the front where she could provide one-on-one help.

Staying calm and reducing stress are also important to Gerrie and help keep her grounded. Some things she does to take care of herself are manicures, pedicures, and yoga. At

the time, she had a toddler and a teenager who helped her to make family more of a priority than her job.

I had to cut back on some things like since the two-year-old was born, I realized I can't take papers home. He won't let me.... Like I, the last time I brought a stack of papers home...before I could even stop him, he saw a pen. He started just cutting them up. It was cute because he was really little. So I would take a picture of it like... "Uh oh students, look who's grading you now! I don't know. He just might be a little more strict than me." But he just needs the attention, so I just...there's no time at home for me to be able to grade papers. So one of the things, with like quizzes and some tests, is I have trained them how to grade their own. We do it as a class, we grade tests and quizzes in class.

To cut back on her workload, Gerrie spent a lot of time at the beginning of the school year training students how to grade their own work. They have to use a special pen and cannot have any other writing utensils on their desks when it is time to grade. Not only does it help reduce stress for Gerrie, but it also helps students see firsthand how to improve their work.

Gerrie's eldest son had been attending school in her district for the past seven years, which also gave her some ties to the community. Although she lives in a different suburb, open enrollment allowed her to bring her son into the district. He previously attended the school district where they lived at the time, but it was difficult to get him to school on time and make it to her job. After two years, she moved him into her current district, which made transportation much easier. Additionally, she could be nearby if something (such as illness) happened to him. Now that he has been in the district for some time, she has built a rapport with his classmates and friends, and the community has welcomed them. During my observation, one student referred to

Gerrie's youngest son as her little brother and was asking how he was doing. When we spoke in the fall, Gerrie mentioned bringing her youngest to the school's homecoming parade because it was a family-friendly event, and the students would be asking to see him.

**Purpose.** The close-knit, family-centered community is what Gerrie attributes to her purpose. She finds purpose in being part of this environment. During our focus group interview, she said:

And I guess my purpose for being here is like, yes, it's a small school, it's a very close-knit, small community, and I just like that I'm able to teach my own style of teaching.

I'm able to do what it is that I want without being micro-managed or being told, "This is how you need to teach, and this is how you need to do this."

Coming from a larger district, Gerrie feels that she can teach freely and be treated fairly in her current district, as opposed to the political battles she once dealt with. When I observed her in the classroom, I noticed the familial culture as students of all races popped in just to say hello throughout the day.

Gerrie also expressed that as an African American woman, she has a greater responsibility to the African American students she serves. In our initial interview, she stated:

I'm pretty sure with the African American students that [they are looking for] somebody they can relate to, because if that's what they're used to or that's who they're used to.

I'm pretty sure if you look around, and I'm talking about just staff and teachers, people who don't look like you and there's one that does, that kind of makes it somebody you feel like you can relate to or feel comfortable with. I'm sure that just kind of goes without saying. I just figured that's probably one of the obvious things as to why they

would feel comfortable around me or being able to ask for help or being able to come to me for certain things.

As a role model, Gerrie stated the following during the focus group interview:

I will say that because African American women are considered a minority, I think that it's more important for my children personally, and just for African American students in general, to be able to see women in those roles, to know that you can overcome challenges or any areas in your life that you might be marginalized....

The roles she referred to extend beyond the classroom and into leadership as well.

***Nurturing servant-leader.*** Gerrie has held various leadership positions—class advisor, LGBTQ sponsor, and student council advisor. She also was part of a 2-year leadership academy conducted by the county. Only a few teachers are selected by each district in the county every other year, and it is highly competitive. Gerrie has used the skills she learned in the leadership academy to improve instructional methods and lead staff development in her building. During our initial interview, she said that leadership should be a “collaborative effort,” which works well with her close-knit school. She even sees the work she does in the classroom as collaborative—from having students participate in the grading process to keeping parents and families informed. I interviewed her after school during finals week, and a student came in during our interview to make up his exam that he had missed earlier in the day because of a doctor’s appointment. The student had forgotten to come after school, so Gerrie called home immediately, and after talking to his mom, he showed up a few minutes later.

Parent communication is a strength of Gerrie’s, as she feels many high school teachers do not frequently discourse with parents. However, Gerrie sends home geometry updates

(sometimes once a week, sometimes every other week) to highlight what has been happening in class. In our first interview, Gerrie described the process:

I think that's why I think the parents are really appreciative of getting the information, because most teachers in high school don't do that.... I felt like if I only tell kids in class stuff, they'll say they didn't know or they forgot. But if I let them and the parents know, it's more of like holding them to it, an accountability thing too, like not only did I tell you, I told your parents too, so they can't use that excuse. It's just so parents know.

Her weekly updates demonstrate her collaborative style of leadership.

In line with the adage "It takes a village to raise a child," Gerrie believes in being accessible to serve students. Since her oldest son participates in a learning co-op (he goes to another building for part of the day), she stays late after school to wait for him to return. The students know that she can be reached during her off hours and, more importantly, that she is concerned about their total well-being.

[T]o care for someone is to make sure that their needs are met. With my students, to make sure that their needs are met, whether it's academic or whatever it is. I know [some students] don't eat breakfast at home, there's some kids who don't eat lunch.... I'm pretty sure that all kids are eligible for the free lunch program with the changes or whatever that have been made, but there's some kids who still choose not to eat lunch or don't eat lunch in the cafeteria. [They] don't want to go to the cafeteria for some reason. They'll all ask me: "Do you have anything to snack on?" I keep stuff, like I keep little crackers, cheeses, stuff like that. Ramen noodles, [I] always have some of those. Sometimes they'll come ask me for stuff like that.



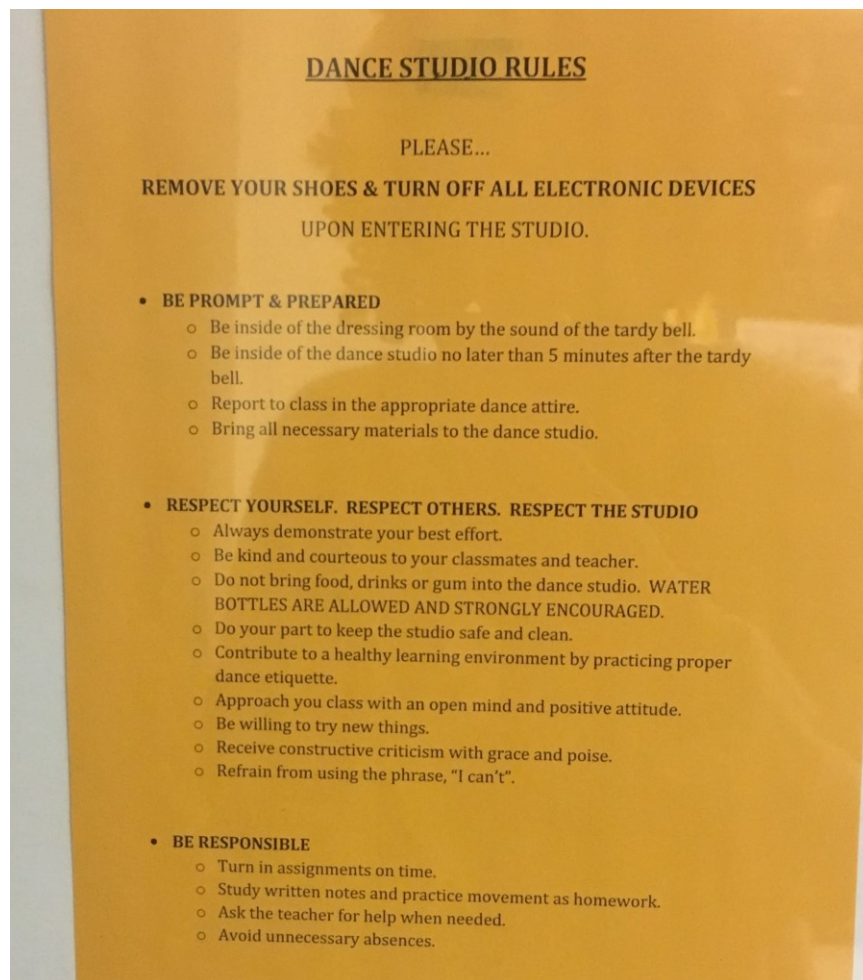
Gerrie's ability to connect with and cultivate students is something she believes to be motherly, so much so that many students lovingly call her mom, including non-Black students.

**Pattie Quinn.** Pattie teaches at one of the high schools in District D. Pattie, her husband, and two children live in one of the suburbs that District D services. At the time of the study, Pattie had taught dance at the same high school in the district for 18 years and was 43 years old. She initially started her career in a large urban district as a dance teacher. After teaching for one year, and at home on bedrest while pregnant with her daughter, Pattie received a series of phone calls from the former principal of her current high school to recruit her because District D was starting a dance program. Pattie never had intentions of leaving her large urban district, as that was where she grew up and attended school. However, after a series of phone calls and having an opportunity to observe the district, Pattie decided to accept the position offered to her.

Throughout the district, surrounding suburbs and metro area, Pattie is well known for the dance program she has built from the ground up. Her dance company is often asked to dance for special events in the district and for the city. Additionally, she started a regional dance intensive where students can spend a weekend training with high-quality instructors and be scouted out by local colleges. There is also a college scholarship opportunity for students during the intensive. When seeking participants for this study, Pattie was recommended by at least three different sources. She prides herself on holding high expectations, and it is evident that others recognize that about her as well. Over the years, funding for the dance program has diminished, yet Pattie has continued to run the program with the same standards as when she first started. She puts in many hours outside of school and has developed her own fundraising system in order to pay for

materials and services. While many highly regard Pattie and her dance program, she feels abandoned and disrespected by her district as funding has been pulled.

Standing tall and erect, with a blunt-cut bob, Pattie embodies the high expectations that she demands. She is warm, kind, and classy, yet firm. She has relationships with the students and their families but is very clear about her needs and demands of others (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Expectations. This photograph was taken of one of Pattie's posters regarding classroom expectations.

I shadowed Pattie after school for a few hours at a dress rehearsal for a year-end recital, and then again a week later during the school day. In her classroom, each hour, the students were watching a video of the recital for part of the class period, and then the second part of the

period, they had a group conversation where they did self-evaluation and discussed goals. She taught two intro dance classes, one intermediate dance class, and then ended the day with an advanced dance class that fed into the dance company which met after school. Students from around the district came to her class throughout the day, as the dance programs at the other two high schools have been eliminated. Pattie wants to give every child an opportunity to dance and has been intentional about making sure her program stays in the forefront.

***Grounded.*** As a long-standing resident within the suburb and nearly two decades of employment in District D, Pattie has strong ties within the community. Her dance company is well known throughout the region. She spoke of her work during the focus group, “Oh my goodness, I haven’t had an MLK day off, my colleagues may have an MLK day off sometimes, but I am always with my group in the community. We are representing [District D] in the community.” In addition to having roots in the local community, Pattie has established her dancers so that they may be prepared nationally. She mentioned in one interview:

I put together the dance company, we’re out in the community a lot. We’re recognized nationally so we do travel and the work that we do, people are very astounded by the fact that the caliber of dance that we do here, the choreography that we do...we pair up pretty well with some of the performing arts schools throughout the country.

The reputation she has built for her program has trickled beyond the walls of her classroom.

Parents and students within the community also recognize and respect the work of Pattie. The dance company functions as a large family, and Pattie has poured many hours into cultivating the group. However, in recent years, even though she still devotes a lot of time to the company, she has cut back some in order to tend to her own family. She said in our interview:

The students like to get together. Part of the old traditions were we come together over the holidays, we'll exchange gifts, we'll do that kind of a thing. But the older my kids got, you know, I started to see that they were feeling the effects of me spending more quality time with my students than I was with them, like the traditions of my dance program was overwhelming my time, whereas our traditions as a family, we didn't even have as many of those, you know. So, I pulled myself out of that and left that to the parents to gather the kids together and they can still exchange gifts and enjoy each other's time, bond together without me being a part of every single thing.

Pattie has learned to care for herself and her own family while pouring her heart into her work.

When I observed her classes, I noticed that the dance company sat closest to Pattie while watching the video and having the self-reflection discussion. They literally sat at her feet and gave full attention to her words, compared to the intro classes, where students sat further from her. Additionally, the dance company seemed to take more liberties—raiding her closet for food (with permission), asking for ailments to be treated (a sunburned student asked Pattie for aloe), and the like. I asked Pattie about their closeness during my second observation, and she agreed that they are comfortable with her, and sometimes too comfortable. Additionally, Pattie sees her role with the families that she serves as a partnership. “It’s like a book end. The parents are on this end, the teacher is on this end and we got to catch the kids in the middle...” She values the work that she does together with parents.

Pattie’s faith is integral to her work. She explained, “Spirituality plays a huge role in that. I think that when people don’t have a belief system of their own, who do you really lay your troubles on while you have to work with the kids?” To center herself, Pattie starts every day with prayer. Before the work day begins, she prays for herself and for her students.

Before I even walk through the doors, I sit in my car and say a prayer, and I'm not even... I don't even say that as a joke, but seriously, because truly when we go into these schools and we're dealing with kids we're coming in and we're bringing all of our own issues with us too, you know.

I saw that prayer was a lifestyle for Pattie; even during my observations, phone calls, and interviews with her, she continually referenced things she was praying about. Pattie feels it was most important as an educator to present her best self to students in order to meet their needs. She feels it is her duty to treat students the way she would want her own children to be treated. She later said in the follow-up interview:

I'm the professional, I'm the adult, and it's my job no matter what mood I'm in or what I'm going through at home to bring these kids my best, and I believe in that. I really, truly do believe in it because I have two kids and I've always wanted that from their teachers, is to bring their best into the room too.

Being grounded allows Pattie to operate in her purpose.

**Purpose.** Pattie believes she has been called to her school district to be an example and a role model for African American students. She spoke of her calling within the interview and focus group, pointing to a specific instance during her recruitment process.

Pattie: I came on that day to see the presentation and I just remember seeing a little girl bouncing around and thinking to myself, "Man, she looks lonely out here" and that was how I decided to take the position.

Me: What do you mean, she looked lonely?

Pattie: Black.

Me: Was she the only Black student?

Pattie: Yep, she, I mean, of course she was not the only one but there were so few, but in the midst of all of the different faces I was seeing and this little girl kind of popped out to me, was very clear that there were so few of them here, I just thought how lonely must that feel, you know?

She later said in that moment she thought, “[These Black students] need me here too.”

Beyond being needed, Pattie sees herself as a role model, particularly for African American students. She described in the focus group:

I certainly feel like there’s a little bit of pressure on you as an African American teacher in a school where it’s predominantly White, because once again I go back to the modeling part. You wanna behave in a way that you want your students to see it, you kind of feel like you’re representing an entire race...you’re kind of standing on the shoulders of other people and you’re kind of trying to represent that way for your students and in front of the others.

As a result, Pattie has noticed the demographics of her dance program change throughout the years. Compared to the other high schools in the district, her dance program has always had more African American students. Now, her program is primarily African American. She said in an interview, “I think I attract the Black students here because there are so few [Black teachers in the district] that they’re looking for some sort of representation.”

As a role model, Pattie is intentional about teaching students how to carry themselves and become a self-advocate. Throughout the day during my observation, Pattie lectured a few girls about their attire and dress. When the girls protested, Pattie remained firm in her stance that they needed to cover themselves as young women. While the students began to talk about their self-evaluations of the dance performance, she taught a few classes how to advocate. She asked

students to think of how she could help them improve as a dancer and complete the sentence starter, “Mrs. Quinn, I need you to...” From there, the conversation unfolded about how to advocate for themselves not just in her class, but with other teachers as well.

Advocacy is important to Pattie, especially as funding for the arts programs has been cut in District D over the past few years. In the focus group and interview, she mentioned how important advocacy is to her profession. “But I’m looking to make sure that I’m advocating for dance...not just for families who can afford it, but I’m advocating so that all [have an opportunity].” She spoke of the risks she has taken professionally to make sure that her dance program has remained on the forefront, by pushing the district to allow dance to be used as a physical education requirement. She relied on the state standards to back up her point and brought her concerns up during a district department meeting, even though many were against it because of job security fears. She spoke of this instance during the focus group:

So, really it came down to, I’m saying, “We need to offer all students this opportunity.”

Not all children want to wait until high school, go into a situation, and now they have to learn to swim. We have students who feel uncomfortable because now they have to take off their hijab in order to get into the pool, or now students have to worry about how are they going to get their Black hair back together to go to class. I said, “Why not allow families to have an option?”

Pattie’s ability to take a stand for her program also connects to her student-centered nature and mindset.

***Nurturing servant-leader.*** As stated earlier, Pattie begins her day with prayer, as an act of faith, but also as a reminder that her focus should be on serving students and not herself. In a follow-up interview, she said she reminds herself to:

Do the grown people stuff later, go into the classroom and just focus on these kids and what they might be going through. And I really try to think, “Okay, everybody could have a bad day. Kids come in with a bad day too. How do I help them through it?”

She upholds leaders to this standard and mindset as well. Over the years, she has been asked to serve on many interview committees, as her building has gone through several administrators. In an interview, she described how she advised one administrator, “I assure that the best thing that you can do is keep doing what’s right for kids and you’re going to get the support that you need from the people who it matters from.”

Additionally, Pattie’s student-centeredness tied into how she developed relationships with her students and demonstrated care to them. As I came to observe a rehearsal, I noticed how Pattie had a rapport with students. She made her high expectations very clear—telling students what they should fix, how they should wait in the wings, and so on. However, she also made time to converse and joke with students. Her conversations with students varied from social media woes to dinner date plans with her husband later in the evening. Within the classroom, it was evident that students felt comfortable talking with her. In one period, a student came in and immediately began hopping around the room on a fitness ball. Pattie joked with the student about her using it so much, and later let me know that the student had been requesting it to let go of extra energy.

Students felt close discussing personal issues with her as well. One student in the dance company, an immigrant from Japan, was dealing with ex-pat struggles within her family. While in America, the student learned that she had a gift for dance, which Pattie helped to cultivate. The student’s family was supposed to return to Japan within the coming school year, and the student had a desire to continue dancing (which was not offered as commonly as in the United



States). The student asked Pattie if it would be okay if she could live with her for two years, until she graduated, to remain in the dance program. However, Pattie did not feel comfortable allowing the student to stay because she has a son at home who is the same age as the student and did not want to complicate anything. She said though, if the circumstances were different, Pattie would have taken the girl in.

Pattie also sees a responsibility to develop and nurture her students, even if it hurts. She spoke twice of an instance within her dance company where she went above and beyond to resolve an issue and teach responsibility. After turning the annual holiday party over to the parents one year, a couple of students snuck in marijuana. Pattie was not at the event, but later found out what transpired, from the host family and other parents who were upset about the incident. After telling administration, she took an entire weekend to meet individually with each student and family in the dance company, and then called in a restorative practice facilitator in the district to hold a restorative circle for the entire company. She spoke of the incident:

I approached it from the standpoint is, you guys are the ambassadors of this program.

You're supposed to represent positive [*sic*], there are standards, and it's understood and written in our by-laws as a program, that you have to represent yourself a certain way inside school, outside of school, [and] throughout the community. Even in your family.

Even though the incident occurred off-campus, she felt compelled to have her program represented positively, and used it as an opportunity to help develop students' character. As a result, students who did not take responsibility for their actions were removed from the dance program.

As a leader in the community, Pattie also develops, mentors, and trains student teachers. She views this as her leadership experience, especially because she feels the arts get overlooked

in her district. Because the arts, primarily the dance program, were cut, she chose to lead in another way. During the focus group, she mentioned:

I started to create my own festivals and started mentoring other teachers. The avenue that I took is to start reaching out and mentoring student teachers, or young teachers and doing things like that. I guess I'm just a little bit resentful in a way; however, at the same time I just kind of go, "I'm not going to bother trying to be a leader in this school, or necessarily in this school district on a formal level."

Pattie is only one of a few dance instructors left in the region, so colleges readily send preservice teachers to her for training. In an interview, she shared her philosophy for training mentee teachers: "I don't want to see you just worried about teaching a pli   and a tondu, I need to see you having conversations with the students..." Just as she is student-centered, she seeks to instill this trait into future teachers because she knows it will lead to success in their careers.

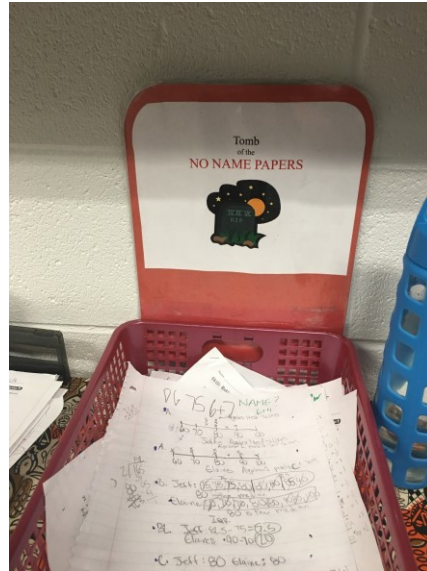
**Jackie Parks.** Jackie is a sixth grade math teacher at one of the middle schools in District D. At the time of the study, Jackie was 44 years old and had been teaching for 21 years. She lives in a major urban city in a nearby county where she was born and where she grew up. Her first teaching assignment was in a district about an hour away from District D, in the city where she attended college, and where her aunt was also employed. Initially Jackie was an art major but switched her course of study to education in the middle of her collegiate journey after wanting to make a difference within the African American community. In addition to teaching math, she directs the plays for her school building, which allows her to incorporate her art background. Jackie comes from a family of educators, including but not limited to her grandmother, aunts, and cousins. Also, Jackie has a son who was 4 years old at the time of the study. A couple years prior to his birth, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and has

worked through treatments ever since. Her main goal is to keep her stress level low, which is what can exasperate her symptoms.

Over the years, I have heard many colleagues in the area speak highly of Jackie, as well as compare me to her. When her name was recommended by a couple of sources for the study, my interest was piqued to finally have the chance to meet the individual I had heard so much about over the years, and to see if there was truly any similarity between us. Upon meeting her, I saw what others have seen over the years—we are both brown-skinned, tall, and small-framed, wear our hair in natural styles (braids, twists, etc.), wear glasses, and are soft-spoken. Additionally, we run our classrooms in a similar style, where rules are explicitly stated and enforced, but fun can be had within those parameters. Both her classroom and mine have a decorated theme, which is rare for secondary rooms—hers was orange and red with lots of attitudinal Garfield posters reminding students to pay attention, do their homework, and turn in assignments.



*Figure 2.* Garfield décor. This photograph was taken of some of the Garfield decorations in Jackie's room.



*Figure 3.* Tomb. This photograph was taken of the no name paper bin in Jackie's room.

The day I came to observe Jackie, she taught five sections of sixth grade math and also had one advisory period where students came in for extra help. With the exception of advisory, each hour the students started off with a warm-up activity on surface area. Then, they watched a video related to the lesson for the day where they were learning about rate, speed, and time. The students were to get in groups and time jumping jacks. Before the activity started, Jackie gave specific instructions about what to do and what not to do, and then walked around to monitor groups as the children completed their jumping jacks. Jackie grew up attending very strict parochial schools, which she thinks influences her teaching style as well. Although she is firm, she pushes each child to do his or her personal best, which was evident as she talked with kids as she monitored the room during their group assignment.

***Grounded.*** Jackie mentioned frequently during our interactions (focus group, interviews, and conversations) that she has to keep her stress level down because of her multiple sclerosis diagnosis. Keeping her stress down is her form of self-care, and her way of remaining grounded. She told the focus group:

So me managing stress was absolutely necessary because my one trigger for my MS, is stress. I feel it immediately. So if I get upset about something, I will hurt from head to toe. I had to do things to manage that, because I knew that I was just inflicting pain on myself. So it was one of those things where you just have to...put it in its place.

When I observed her in the classroom, I noticed that from time to time, Jackie would sit at her desk and teach the class from a seated position. After I learned about her having multiple sclerosis, I realized that she was staying seated for health reasons and to eliminate stress. Outside of school, she participates in African dance, zumba, and spending time with friends to relieve stress.

In the workplace, Jackie has other ways of managing her stress. She said during an interview and the focus group that she chooses not to get too concerned with district politics when new initiatives are being introduced.

I've observed throughout the years...you can devote your time and do everything on that committee, give your feedback and everything, and despite results this other thing happens. Because, I feel like the decision is made already. So, that kind of discourages me when it comes to certain things.

Over the years, she has learned to protect her energy by focusing on things she can control and letting everything else go. Even when there have been conflicts with racist families on her job, she has refused to allow further communication to transpire so that she can preserve her peace.

She spoke of one incident during our interview and focus group:

There was one time when I refused to talk to a parent. I told my assistant principal, "If he has something to say to me, he needs to tell you, and you can communicate it to me because I'm done. You know, I'm not dealing with that." I still dealt with his daughter

and the math lab after school to help and that sort of thing. But he can't disrespect me like that.

Also at work, she often sits outside when the weather is nice, with another African American female teacher who works in the building. The two have created a safe space where they can relax and let their guard down.

Jackie's relationship with God also helps her to relieve stress. She views each of her students as a child of God and is compelled to treat them that way. When frustrated with student behaviors, she has learned to turn them over to God and believe that He will take care of the situation. Trusting in God is her form of self-care, which she described in the focus group and interview:

Some of my most difficult students, there are times where I say, "I have to give them to Jesus." I have to remind myself that "he or she, [they are] yours Lord, I've done what I can do," and I release myself from it and I pray for those students.

By turning students over to God, Jackie is able to free her mind and prevent her body from having a flare-up.

This connection to God is something that she learned through her family. Jackie is very close to her family and still lives near her mom and aunt (who are twin sisters). Even though she has a lengthy commute, she chooses to live where she does out of comfort and familiarity. Many women in her family are teachers, including her aunt and her grandmother. Her grandmother developed Alzheimer's later in life, and Jackie relied on the power of prayer to get through that experience. Her faith was also influenced by her Catholic school upbringing; she attended Catholic school from elementary through high school and referenced that how she had been taught impacted her practice during our one-on-one interview. Her parochial school influence

was also evident as I shadowed her in the classroom. Jackie gave very clear instructions and held all students accountable to her expectations, despite labels and disabilities.

**Purpose.** Jackie spent a lot of time shadowing her aunt in her classroom growing up and considers her to be her mentor. Her aunt also taught in a primarily White school district, in a city about an hour away called University Town, near Jackie's college. Her career lasted over 30 years. Jackie would often ask her aunt why she taught all the way out there, and she shared the response during the focus group. "My aunt would always say, 'They need me here.'... Her circumstances and things led her to University Town, and she was there forever. And she would tell me, 'My kids need me here.'" Jackie adopted the same mindset with her students as well, particularly as a role model.

She spoke of a parent who was glad that her child was in her classroom:

[P]arents are like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so glad she [can] see herself in front of the classroom." You know, or even my natural hair, because her daughter had natural hair too...so something like that, and it's okay. You have this professional woman that's in front of you every day, and who knows what her hair is going to look like each day. And you can testify to that, or you can relate to that, connect to that.

She sees herself as a role model to students of other ethnicities as well. At one point, District D had over 100 different languages spoken by students, due to its diverse demographics. Jackie recollected on her experience teaching an ESL student from Albania during our focus group:

I had one student from Albania, and she straight up was like, "I've never basically interacted with a Black person." You know, she was like, "You're the first Black person that I've interacted with." Or whatever. And it reminded me of that thing my aunt said, you know, "They need you here too."

Jackie finds herself advocating for all students, just as she sees a responsibility to be a role model to all. She is intentional about advocating for African American students and can relate to what it feels like to be the only person of color in the room. In an interview, she described what it is like to return to the district after a long break:

And I kept telling [staff members], I've gone all through [college] in different classes where I walk in the room and I'm scanning to see who else looks like me. I say I might not know them, know anything about them, but even just seeing a reflection of me in one part of a room can bring just a little bit of comfort, you know, as far as that. That's how I feel at the beginning of the school year. I still do that. I still scan the room when I go into the room.

When I came to observe Jackie, I saw how she related to African American students in the hall and held their behavior to high expectations, from horseplay to dress code.



*Figure 4.* Calendar. This photograph was taken of an African American themed calendar that Jackie kept at her desk.



Jackie advocates for other students as well. She knows that mathematics can be a challenge for some students but continues to hold her standards of where they should be. I saw this when observing her—during homeroom, she specifically called for certain students to come to her room to receive extra help or make up work so that they could get caught up. She taught in multimodal ways to reach different types of learners, and even spoke to the kids about what it meant to be a visual learner like herself. During our interview, she spoke of what she does to encourage students:

So, I pull several kids aside to let them know, “I see you. I see you working now. You know, don’t let this discourage you.” Or on something, they may write a note, “I tried my best, Ms. Parks,” and I might put back, “I can see the improvement, keep trying.”

But I pull them aside to let you know you still have to have that consistent effort and I think that’s one of those things where you can support a kid in just saying, “I know this is hard for you.”

Jackie has an ability to help students see and reach their own potential.

*Nurturing servant-leader.* Outside of the classroom, Jackie leads in her own quiet way, through directing plays. Because she feels that the district has preselected its vision and leaders, Jackie chooses not to engage in district decisions, but rather focus on her on locus of control.

She talked about her plays during both her interview and focus group:

So, for me, the leadership roles I choose are things where I engage directly with the kids and I know what my end product’s going to be.... Like I used to do this program.... It started very small, just a seed, and then it blossomed over a ten-year period. It was Black History month and I incorporated speakers and things like that, and I felt like I reached

out to all of the kids, and through plays.... I've done plays with my schools and things like that. I view that as my leadership.

Through the plays, Jackie has been able to develop relationships with students and create an accepting environment for students who would typically be considered "misfits."

Jackie has the ability to relate to her students and form a relationship with them as well. When I observed her in the classroom, a group of students were gathered around a desk, comparing drawings. They then asked Jackie her opinion as to whose was the best. She jokingly said, "Am I Judge Judy?" as the children brought their drawings up to her desk. She shares her culture with her class, and told the focus group of an experience she had as an elementary school teacher with her White student:

I did *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House*, it's a Faith Ringgold book. But I did a dinner in my classroom, [when] I taught fifth grade.... I did the food from *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House*. We had a little [tastefest], well, like a little dinner in the classroom or whatever, and I remember this one boy. He came up to me, he was like, "Miss Parks, those greens were really good. I've never had those before..." You know, just that I could offer that boy that experience, he was a little White boy. I can't remember his name. I can see his face, but he loved the greens.

We laughed so hard during the focus group as she told us this, at the absurdity of a little White boy who had fallen in love with soul food without even realizing it. Something that belongs to "us" as Black people, Jackie was able to make accessible to and appreciated by all.

Jackie is also able to connect with students who have disabilities or feel ostracized, as she is quite transparent about having multiple sclerosis. During an interview, she talked about how she teaches students to overcome stigmas:

I know I have kids who go home to abuse, I know I have kids who go home to alcoholics, kids who are struggling with their sexuality, just everything on earth, you know. But you got to learn how to overcome it or try to. At least try to push back a little bit on the problems, otherwise they're going to eat you up.

She also makes a point to talk with students about what is going on in their world:

I joke around with some of my kids or we'll talk, or we'll have a conversation or I might say, "How did the hockey game go yesterday, did you win?" Or, "What happened with this?" Or one of my students, her brother has scoliosis, he had surgery this year, and so she's like he had this back surgery, I said, "Oh, does he have scoliosis?" and she was just like, "How do you know about that?" It's like, "Well, I've had students with that before." And so, we'll have a conversation about that so even those little tidbits, it helps and it's not always a hug or whatever but just that, you got an interest, or you know something about them, it makes a difference.

Jackie attributed her ability to do this as what made her stand out from other teachers, because she felt that not everyone tries to connect in this manner.

**Riley Davis.** The district Riley teaches in is on the nearly rural, far north end of Maple County, where few African American families reside. Compared to the other school districts in the study, District E had the least amount of diversity and the highest percentage of White students. At the time of the study, Riley had been teaching social studies at the only high school in the district for 14 years and was 39 years of age. She is married with three children—one boy and two girls; her family lives about a half-hour away from her district, in a different county. Although she was slightly young to be considered an "othermother," she came highly recommended by the county's Diversity and Equity Specialist. She is the first African American

teacher to be hired by the district and, at the time, was still the only one. Coming from a military family, Riley has been accustomed to moving around and adapting to all types of people. Her family is originally from Michigan and returned to the state when she was a junior in high school after her mother passed away. Riley stumbled upon the district during a collegiate job fair and has been with them ever since.

What sticks out most about Riley is her sense of pride. She is proud of her heritage, accomplishments, her family, and who she is. She even stands tall and confidently, fair-skinned with long, dark hair, and unafraid to wear heels. She takes great pride in her profession, and freely discussed ways she has impacted her school through leadership from our introduction to our final meeting. Riley is a leader in many ways—she once advised a dance squad and she currently is in charge of a group for Muslim students, a diversity club, a confidence club, a girl empowerment club, and an honor society. Additionally, she is the summer school supervisor and has also developed many courses that she teaches. When she was first hired by the district, she taught British literature, contemporary literature, and world history. After spending a year being torn between two subjects, the district moved her solely to the social studies department, where she developed the world religions course that she teaches, along with world history.

Riley's classroom is inclusive, and it was evident that others felt safe around her. She had artifacts from around the world and made her classroom feel like a home, with the use of tablecloths, some comfortable seating, bookshelves, and lamps.



*Figure 5.* Riley's classroom. This photograph was taken of a portion of the elements of Riley's classroom that made it feel like home.

Instruction varied each hour as she taught different subjects, but students were comfortable asking her personal questions or taking care of needs. A few students and staff members popped in throughout the day looking for items to use or borrow—over-the-counter pain medicine for a staff member with a headache, a writing utensil for another student, lined paper for another. It was clear that many felt Riley to be resourceful. Even when visiting other teachers and administrators, all had nothing but praise to give of Riley and her contributions to the district. In addition to spending time in her classroom, I also attended her honor society meeting, which began about 30 minutes before school started and was mostly student-led.

***Grounded.*** In the interview and focus group, Riley discussed the need for confidence as an educator and the importance of instilling it into students. Riley believes that confidence will carry you far and is what opens up the door for the leadership opportunities that she holds. She described in the focus group, "If you have the confidence, just to...speak for yourself or just do different things...that will take you far, that will get you into avenues." Riley has high standards for how she carries herself, particularly as the only African American woman employed in her

district. She described during the focus group how she stands up to coworkers and will not let them talk to her in a disrespectful manner:

And when you have standards, it's like, "Excuse me! You're not going to talk to me that way. Just so we're clear...I haven't talked to you that way, you're not gonna talk to me that way." I'm sorry, that's who I will always be.

Additionally, Riley wears several hats in her building and prides herself on doing all of her jobs extremely well, but also mentioned that appearing as a superwoman can be damaging as well. She stated the following in the focus group:

I have leadership roles. Just for the record, this is what hurts me. I do all of my roles, I'm proud to say this, very well. So there's no half-stepping on my part. That's another thing that feeds into that...[my coworkers think I] can do everything because I am always acting as if I can.

Riley understands that sometimes appearing confident as a Black woman in a majority-White environment can be a double-edged sword.

Regardless, Riley has been admired by students because of her confidence. Just as she has standards for how her coworkers address her, when I observed her, I noticed she held high expectations for how students communicated with her. This was demonstrated in not being shy about correcting students in her classroom who tried to talk back or be disrespectful.

Furthermore, the confidence group that was started by students began because students wanted Riley to teach them the confidence she embodied. A conversation with one student remains etched in Riley's memory, and she shared it during our interview:

[O]ne thing she said that really kind of just stands with me and still does, she's like, "You know, Mrs. Davis, I never hear you say you don't like something about yourself," and I

said, “No. There’s nothing wrong with me. You know, we’re all different,” and she’s like, “Wow, like that’s so amazing,” and she’s like, “Because everyone is always saying, ‘I don’t like this about myself. I don’t like that.’” I said, “Yeah, but how negative is that if you spend your whole life just always looking at what’s wrong with you?”

Riley spoke of students recognizing and acknowledging her confidence in our time together, and even in my observation, I noticed how students were interested in learning more about her and felt comfortable coming to her with questions, problems, or issues.

Riley’s ability to walk in confidence helps her to assert herself, which is a form of self-care. She requires verbal respect from others, but also is cautious about protecting her family and her time. At one point, Riley was the coach for a dance squad at the school, for free. After dealing with excessive girl drama within the squad after a few years, Riley gave up the position. During our interview, she expressed that she was already spread thin, and she and her husband decided together that she needed to step down in order to have more peace and time with family. Riley had pictures of her family prominently displayed in her classroom and spoke of her children throughout the day when I came to shadow her. When I came to do the interview with Riley, she was finishing up a day of supervising summer school, and her youngest daughter was with her. From the beginning, she expressed that the interview needed to end by a certain time so that she could take care of some things for her family. Riley is very protective of herself and her family and is not afraid to speak up for them. During our focus group, she mentioned how she even guards the image of her family with her co-workers. Her son is a golfer, and she has had to defend that identity to her coworkers, who automatically assume him to be a football or basketball player because of his race.

In addition to being extremely confident and assertive, Riley is also very grounded in her faith, which she disclosed in a follow-up interview. She is a Christian and comes from a religious lineage—her grandfather was a pastor. Riley grew up attending church, is a former Sunday school teacher, and currently hopes to instill tenets of her faith into her own children as she raises them. Riley’s world religions course allows her to display religious artifacts in her classroom; I could not help but notice all of the inspirational quotes she had posted, which also served as motivation for students.



*Figure 6.* Inspirational quotes. This photograph was taken of some of the inspirational quotes Riley has in her classroom.

In our follow-up interview, I learned that Riley finds other ways of communicating spiritual truths to students as well, by rephrasing Bible scriptures to them:

I will often say...“To whom much is given, much is required, or much is expected.” I always tell students they’re very fortunate, we live in a really good community, we have a beautiful school, and it’s a shame for kids to come and not take advantage of everything that’s offered.



Riley relies heavily on her faith as a teacher and a leader; it is the driving force behind what she does. She further explained in our interview, “[I]t keeps me grounded, and it keeps me realizing that there’s a higher purpose, and that I am put here for this higher purpose and it is to teach and educate kids.”

**Purpose.** Riley believes that she is called to teach and that is her purpose, which she spoke of in two separate interviews. She said that she always knew that she wanted to teach; there was no other career option she desired. Although she happened to stumble upon her district during a job fair, Riley has always believed that it is no accident that she landed where she did. In our focus group, she stated:

[T]he first year I was there, I was like, “They need me there. You know, our [African American] kids are there, need me there.” And the staff needed me there...you got to have people of color and diversity in your building.

Although it can be difficult being the only African American staff member at her school, Riley has continued to persevere because she feels it is important to be a role model. She spoke of this responsibility during the focus group, “But when you’re Black and you’re one of few, you’re all the same. You know, you’re kind of all grouped together and it’s an overwhelming responsibility, especially when there’s so few people of color in your building.” As I observed Riley, I noticed how one African American student, Aisha, was drawn to her. Aisha had Riley as a teacher the year before and had signed up to take an elective with her during this school year. Whenever Riley needed help, Aisha was the first to volunteer, and spent a portion of the class period trying to convince her teacher to accompany her on a field trip that she had already been on the year before. As the school day went on, Aisha stopped by two more times, looking for supplies.

Riley had many notes from former students hanging up in her classroom and saved to her computer. She showed me one from a former African American student who emailed her to update her on his collegiate progress and to thank her:

I do want to express my gratitude for you being the role model that you were for me.

Being taught by a highly intelligent, eloquent and kind woman of color set an example for me and showed me that I had the potential to be great, despite what preconceived notions others have of me based off my appearance....

However, students of other races acknowledged Riley as a role model as well. Another paper was attached to her board from a Muslim student, who wrote an essay comparing Riley to Frederick Douglass. The student described how Riley had advocated for cultural awareness and change within the school, and the impact that it had on her.

Riley is an advocate for social justice among her colleagues as well. She has a team of allies that she has helped to cultivate who promote equity work within the school. The day that I came to shadow, one of Riley's allies came in during her prep hour to discuss a diversity issue that had arisen. She explained how the group came to be during our focus group, saying, "What I did at the end of last year is I started a diversity committee.... Create a diversity committee and get those White faces on the diversity committee [who are] like-minded people...." She knew that in order to further diversity initiatives and change school culture, she would need a team to help advocate for her. In addition to the committee, Riley also created a part-time equity position for herself for the coming school year. She proudly spoke of this accomplishment during our interview, my observation, and in the focus group. Riley found out that other districts had equity coordinators, presented the facts to her administration, along with long- and short-

term goals, and was approved to do the work part-time in the following school year. Her hope is that eventually it will become a full-time position that she can transition into.

*Nurturing servant-leader.* Riley's leadership abilities span much further than the diversity work that she does. In an interview, she said that she is constantly being called upon to lead groups or work as an advisor. I partially believe this is because her colleagues think very highly of her. During my observation, she took me around the building on her prep hour to meet her administrators and other point people in the building. Each individual admonished Riley and spoke of her accolades upon our meeting. Riley knows that she is highly respected, and spoke of this during our focus group:

I do feel respected in particular.... For example, my principal. I have been his daughter's only history teacher. I was her world history, U.S. history, now she is back to the electives.... I get everyone's kids that are teachers at the district, the administrators, the superintendent of curriculum. So for me, at first I thought, are people trying to test and see [what I'm doing]?... But it's respect, you know? So getting everyone's kids all the time, and even working with them in clubs, or for the most part teaching them and then coming back for clubs....

Within the classroom, Riley has created a nurturing environment, which can be a challenge for a high school teacher. Throughout the day, I noticed students eating snacks, and even in one long period, students got a 10-minute break, and Riley encouraged them to get something to eat. Riley even had a snack at her desk, a bag of gummy bears, and asked the students if they wanted to share them with her. Later she told me that most teachers do not let students eat in their classes, but she does because she knows it is hard for them to focus if they are hungry. Her only rule is that they must clean up after themselves. Much like at Gerrie's

school, students popped in throughout the day, needing pens, paper, and recommendation letters. I asked Riley about it during our interview, and she said it is something that has increased over the years:

I just noticed as I became more confident and comfortable in myself as a teacher and my skills changed and I became more visible, that's when you open yourself up to things like, "Can I have a pencil? Can I have this?" Kids, they'll walk all the way from downstairs to say, "Can I borrow a pencil?" Or, "Can you write a pass to class because if I come to class without a pencil again, my teacher's not going to let me in or not let me this or that."

In addition to being accessible, Riley has also developed relationships with students and families, which I observed while shadowing her. Throughout the day, she opened herself up to have conversations with students as they were completing their work—from checking in on students who were not feeling well to inquiring about sports involvement. Students felt comfortable sitting on the floor to do their work or moving desks to work in groups. The classroom had a home-like feel, and Riley cultivated a relaxed environment. She also goes out of her way to develop relationships with student leaders in the clubs she advises. When I asked Riley about relationship building during our interview, she responded with, "I think it's important that we connect on a personal level, and it makes it easier to work together throughout the school year..." Being relational and caring is pivotal to Riley's style of leadership, both in and out of the classroom.

**Natalie White.** Natalie is a seasoned educator who speaks passionately about her dedication to her craft. At the time of the study, she was 58 years of age and had been teaching elementary school for 37 years. She is married with five adult children; she resides in the suburb

in which she teaches and her children attended the school system. Initially, she and her husband were from a nearby state, which is where she began her teaching career. However, his company moved them to their current state, where they had no family. Natalie wanted to work in the same district where they lived in order to be close to her children in case something happened. She has now been teaching in her district for over 26 years, and has remained at the same elementary school as a first grade teacher the majority of the time. In addition to her teaching duties, Natalie does diversity work for her district and also ran a Black parent organization for many years.

Natalie is petite with soft black hair and a caring voice that gives clear directions. Her voice is soft but firm, loving yet disciplined. When I got to her school, she went out of her way to make sure I knew what to expect for the day and see if I needed any accommodations. The staff at her school was the same way, from paraprofessionals to administrators. I later found out that their building is known in the district for being friendly and community-minded. Over the years, the staff and families who attend have made it that way. Natalie had a classroom with many challenges and special needs students. She had two paraprofessionals in her room to assist with students. However, the classroom ran like a well-oiled machine. Students had been trained and knew what they expectations were each day.



*Figure 7.* Elementary classroom. This photograph was taken of Natalie's classroom.

The day I came to visit, Natalie's school was having a field day. So, the students did their normal lessons in the morning, and then after lunch, they participated in the field day. Before going out, Natalie spent time talking with students about what to expect and how the day would go. The school had an abundance of parent volunteers, so all Natalie had to do at each station was play along with her students or help supervise. The parents did most of the explaining and facilitating. It was a hot day, and several of Natalie's colleagues kept checking on her, getting her water and asking her when she would take a break. Later, she disclosed to me that she had a heart attack a few years prior during a school fun run, so her staff wanted to make sure she was taking care of herself. In this building, it appeared that care was not something demonstrated top-down, but rather a community-wide effort.

***Grounded.*** When Natalie and her family moved from a nearby state, it became increasingly important for her to be close to her children and to be intentional about their upbringing. She said during an interview and the focus group that she decided to work in District F because that is where her kids went to school and she wanted to be nearby. If something happened while they were at school, she would not have to travel far to attend to them. Natalie has been at her current elementary school for over 20 years. Throughout the school district and surrounding community, she has gained notoriety and respect for her many years of dedicated service. When I shadowed her during the day, I noticed that an award for a grant she had recently received was displayed for the staff to see in the teachers' lounge. Outside of her building, administrators in central office value her as well. Her reputation has granted her the respect of the district superintendent, with whom she converses freely and openly. When racial issues have arisen in the district or African American parents have shared a concern with

her, Natalie has gone directly to the superintendent to seek change. She described this process during our focus group, saying:

People still call me where they won't call the district. I'm looked at as the leader there.

So he knows that if I call him and say, "Here's a potential problem that the district needs to start addressing, before it's a problem," he actually said he will listen to me.

Natalie takes pride in her work as an educator and doing her job well. She realizes that she is at the end of her career and has plans to retire within the next five years, but wants to keep teaching while she has the energy and heart for it. In our interview, she said:

I don't want to be the teacher that somebody says, "She should've left a long time ago.

She finally retired? Well, it's about time." That's not gonna be me. I promised myself I wouldn't do that. So I'll keep that joy there.

In order to maintain that joy, Natalie has learned the value of self-care. During the observation, interview, and focus group, Natalie described what it was like to have heart problems at school about three years ago. She was running with a student during the fun run and felt nauseous. She eventually made it to the office where a teacher's aide (who was a former nurse) took her blood pressure and called the ambulance after concluding something was wrong. Natalie later learned that she had a heart condition where her heart goes out of rhythm. Since that time, she has relinquished many responsibilities on her job and at church as well, as she was highly active at both—working literally every day of the week.

Since moving to the area, Natalie was intentional about being active in church with her family. Belonging to a church, particularly a church with an African American congregation, was important to her so that her children could have connections to culture and community as they were away from extended family. During our interview, she stated, "I wanted our children

to be exposed to our culture because I knew that our kids were gonna be going to school here and we don't have any family here so our children have to go to a Black church." She and her husband have been active with various ministries within the church, including youth ministry, Vacation Bible School, and marriage ministry. Aside from belonging to a church, Natalie has a relationship with God as a Christian. She prays regularly and also includes her classroom and students in her prayers. She uses prayer as a way to connect with God, but also as a tool to maintain peace. When I came to visit, she talked to me about having a challenging year and relying on prayer to create peace in her life. During a follow-up interview, she described how she prays for strength to make it through the school year, and how being connected to God empowers her to be an anchor for her students. Furthermore, Natalie believes that her spirituality helps her connect to her purpose as an educator. She said during our follow-up interview:

I believe that every child is placed in my room for a reason, and I just want to be there for all the kids that God has me in there for. So, I do my best, I pray for my classroom, pray for the wisdom to do the things I'm supposed to do, for the connections that I'm supposed to do, the ability to teach and do what I'm supposed to do.

She believes she has been placed in the classroom to connect with children and be whatever He needs her to be for them.

**Purpose.** During our focus group and one-on-one interview, Natalie spoke on being in the district to connect with all students, but especially the African American students. She constantly referred to African American students as "our kids." When asked during the focus group to clarify, she stated, "Our African American children that are attending school, which are few and far between. But I look at it as when I see an African American child, they are our



kids.” In the interview, she described how she felt an obligation to be a role model for students of all races, but specifically for African American students:

And also, our kids need a role model too. It is important for them to see there are African American teachers.... So I feel like I play a very important role to be here...for everybody and for the African American kids who are in the district, for them to say there are [African American] teachers here.

Natalie’s use of “our” is fictive kinship, in that she sees other African American students as part of her family or village.

I saw firsthand the depth of Natalie’s village when I shadowed her during the school’s field day. Before the field day began, students had lunch with a member from their family. Some students were waiting for their parents to arrive in the lobby; they were coming late. Natalie sat with students and comforted them, reassuring them that their parents/family members were indeed coming to spend time with them. Her principal had to persuade Natalie twice to go to lunch and let her take over sitting with students—Natalie was very concerned about the well-being of the children. Then, once field day began, I watched one African American father come up to her and give her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She later said that he had been a parent at her school for many years, and he was attending the field day with his youngest son, who was now in fifth grade. They initially became acquainted when his eldest son (who is now 24 years old) was attending the school. The father’s first wife passed away from cancer during the first few weeks of school while his eldest was in attendance. One of Natalie’s daughters was 16 at the time and would help out after his wife’s passing by babysitting for him. He and Natalie formed a bond, and he could call her for anything, like family.

In addition to being present for students as a role model, Natalie uses her identity as an African American woman to advocate for students of color within the district and in her building. She described her work in our focus group:

For me, being in the district for so long, I was known as the leader. I started an [African American] parent group...that got involved a lot with the Maple County Parent Group....

But I feel like a lot of the leadership as far as making sure that our voices for our kids are heard, that somebody has to speak up.... So I would get on a lot of different committees and be that model and be that voice for our kids, and then it spreads to the district.

Although Natalie turned over responsibility from the parent group a few years ago, she still holds a position as an advocate for African American students and families. Within her building, Natalie is often called upon to speak with African American students if there is a problem or if there needs to be a mediation between White teachers and African American families. When I observed her and during the interview, she described different instances where she had to step in on behalf of Black families and mediate issues within the school district. She also mentioned one instance where she had to assert her position and legacy within the district with an African parent who was reluctant to have his son in her class. She said to him, "...[Y]ou better thank your lucky stars that you have me because I guarantee you, you're probably not gonna have any more [teachers of color]. That will be the only experience of your child having a Black teacher." After that conversation, and over time, the parent changed his opinion of Natalie and grew to respect her.

***Nurturing servant-leader.*** Within her building, Natalie has served as both a formal and an informal leader. Her current principal used to teach at the school and moved into the administrative position after pursuing higher education and gaining experience. When I

shadowed Natalie for the day, it was apparent that she and her principal had a caring relationship built on mutual respect. I later learned that Natalie formerly served on the school's leadership team with her principal. Natalie also informed me of how she has gone to her current principal and past principals to solicit advice and voice concerns; her current principal has been more receptive than some in the past. Furthermore, Natalie has acted as an informal mentor to other young employees in her district and building.

But at the same time, recently I'm starting to see some of the younger [teachers] that are coming through, and I'm like, "Oh, honey, you're gonna have to take a more leadership role. It's not okay for you to be out at recess duty on your phone because they're looking at you going, 'Look at her, she's on her phone.'" So again, there's that leadership/mentor part where I wanna take her aside and say, "Now listen, don't do that."

As a leader, Natalie used a lot of her ability to be caring, personal, and relational to connect with others.

Additionally, Natalie has held various formal leadership positions within her district. As the creator and leader of the aforementioned African American parent group, she ran a Saturday school once a week where students of color could come to get homework help, tutoring, and standardized testing preparation. She mentioned the group in all of our interactions, but gave specifics of how it worked in our one-on-one interview. The school was open on Saturday mornings for two hours, for 10 to 12 weeks during each semester.

So the first hour, 45 minutes, the teachers...and it was all parent-driven...they would teach a lesson for that and then because I had access and I knew how to get to it, I would look at the curriculum guides for all the math classes and I would develop and see for whatever that time period was, because it was like a ten-week time period, and for those

ten weeks for, say second grade, I would...see what they would be teaching and then I would develop a lesson for the parents to teach in that second hour for them so that the kids would either be introduced, they would be front-loaded with the math information, or it would be a review. Plus, we would do games.

Natalie created all of the curriculum herself, by grade level, and would spend free time developing materials in the summer and also in her spare time during the school year.

I always believe that...if you ask somebody to volunteer for something, they shouldn't have to look for their materials. So, here's your notebook, here's all the materials that you need. Whatever they needed they would have. That last year, a couple of times we would struggle with the teachers so I actually would be teaching my first grades and preparing.

When Natalie turned the group over to other parents to lead, the momentum of the group diminished. However, recently a new leader had taken over, and the group was starting up again in the coming school year.

Beyond the African American community within the district, Natalie has also served as a diversity leader. She currently sits on a diversity council and leads many equity initiatives within the district. The council has existed for about five years, and Natalie has not been afraid to speak her mind and challenge the group to move beyond surface-level existence and head towards institutional change, which she talked about during our focus group:

I spoke up at a diversity council one time and told them that the whole meeting was a farce.... I said, "I don't know why I'm here. I've been on the diversity council since the inception of the committee and we're now four or five years later and we're still talking

about the exact same thing that we talked about five years ago. We're not doing anything. This is just surface."

Natalie later clarified to the council what she meant and hoped to make amends if she offended anyone; yet at the same time she seemed confident that because of her stature in the community and district, she still had her colleagues' respect.

Natalie also works to create an inclusive learning environment for all students within her classroom. The grant she had been recently awarded was to purchase fluorescent light covers to meet the needs of her autistic students who had a light sensitivity. All of her lights had a cover over them that looked like a sky and clouds.



*Figure 8.* Cloud covers. This photograph was taken of the fluorescent light covers Natalie purchased for her class with a grant.

When I looked at her reading nook, Natalie had a diverse selection of picture books to represent all the different cultures of students she had in class. The day that I came to observe, she read *The Empty Pot* during the community circle, a book about a young Chinese boy who is trying to grow seeds in a pot for the emperor. In our focus group, Natalie talked about how her

work with the diversity council allows visit different places of worship, one being to a Hindu temple. She then told her class about her trip, who had the following reaction.

I was talking about the temple and everything, and I was trying to include my Indian kids.... And then I talk about henna, we talk about Diwali and we would so all of these different things. And so when I went to the temple, I even had some photos and everything like that. And I was talking about it and showing them, and a little boy's like...then a little girl said, "I know why you went to temple, and I know why you know about having henna and stuff. It's because you're Indian."

She went on to say that some of her Indian students thought she was Indian because her skin was brown like theirs.

In our follow-up interview, Natalie talked about the importance of creating an accepting environment and maintaining relationships with all students:

There's all different kinds of religions [in our community], so I respect all of those religions and give honor. Actually I try to allow the kids to not be ashamed of what they believe in. So if we're celebrating, like Diwali just started, so I recognize that Diwali starts today, and the kids go, "Oh! You know about Diwali?" Because they're so shocked, they've never been around anyone that actually knew about their religion. I have a boy who celebrates Hanukkah, for me it is so important for everybody to feel valued, and to feel important, and to know that what their beliefs is important.

Natalie maintains contact with many students and is well known, partially because of her tenure in the district and also because she is a community member. The other reason, as she stated during our interview, is it is just part of her personality:

Well, that's kind of just my personality. This graduation season is a perfect example.

I've been to so many graduation parties this time.... [O]ne...[was] a little Indian boy, I had him in first grade. I just try to show my heart and so they keep in touch with me.

One of the ladies that is running for...I think she is running for Congress, an Indian lady and I've really been involved with her over the years doing certain things and so I keep in touch with them. My philosophy as far as children and people are concerned is that people want to feel that they are valued and respected and know that they are important and so that's what I have approached. I have always made a lot of connections....

Being accepting and relational is extremely important to Natalie. During the focus group, when asked what she wanted to be remembered for, Natalie responded that she wanted to be remembered for being caring. She also said in our interview:

You know, but I love teaching and I love being part of the village wherever I am. I think we all play a part in children's lives. And so, if I am a part of them, I want them to know that they are loved and respected. I'm giving them my best. And that's how I've always been, in whatever I do.

## **Chapter 5: Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

### **Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

At the end of our focus group, I asked the participants if they had any questions for me. Zoe asked what similarities or commonalities did I notice between all of the participants in the study. Interestingly enough, the more time I spent with each individual in the study and then analyzing the data, I realized how uniquely different each person actually was. However, these differences did not separate the suburban othermothers, but rather seemed to unite them under a larger umbrella within Black Feminist Care. Additionally, I could see portions of myself with each participant.

This chapter will begin and end with self-reflections: the former about who each participant represented to me, and the latter about my future as a suburban othermother. A brief explanation of each of the three themes will then be presented—othermothers are grounded, purpose-driven, and nurturing servant-leaders—along with a model to explain how these themes connect to each other as well. Next, the data will be used to answer the three research questions: *What is the experience of the suburban othermother? What is her essence? How does she see herself and her responsibility to her community?* Additionally, as conclusions are drawn, connections will also be made to the ethic of care, African and African American spirituality and ethics, Black feminism, womanism, and Black feminist care. These conclusions will then lead to the significance of the research and the implications it has on the educational community. Limitations of the study will also be presented, along with suggestions for future research.



**Self-Reflection**

After each interaction with the participants, I journaled my reflections for the day in a notebook or audio-recorded them. What resonated with me the most was that although the women were extremely different from each other, I felt a personal connection to each one. By personal connection, I mean that I saw a piece of myself or someone I knew in each participant. With Bonnie, I was reminded of my Aunt Laveen, who is a retired principal, former teacher, and current mentor principal. They share the same sense of humor, confidence, and no-nonsense personality. I spent time with my aunt when she was an active principal, and even now as she has mentored others within the profession. For years, I have wondered what she was like when she was a classroom teacher, and after observing Bonnie, I felt like I vicariously lived the experience.

Zoe's spunky personality reminded me of a childhood friend, Marie, who is now a teacher. Marie and I have known each other since the fourth grade; she never meets a stranger and is well-traveled. Like Zoe, Marie has kind of gone wherever the wind has blown when it comes to teaching; she prays about it and then moves on to the next assignment. She has taught on the East Coast, in the Midwest in two different urban metropolitan areas, and overseas in the Middle East and China. Marie and Zoe are both small in stature with a booming personality and a gift for gab. Also, both are very funny, very candid, and direct in sharing exactly how they feel.

Gerrie did not remind me of any friends or family members, but I personally connected to her laid-back personality and peaceful disposition. I watched how open and flexible she seemed to be in regards to scheduling times to meet and the way she ran her classroom. Gerrie also valued the importance of maximizing her time while at work, which is something I have really

learned to do, particularly while pursuing a doctoral degree and teaching full-time. These past few years, I have been intentional about using my prep time wisely and doing my grading at work; it has proven futile to bring home papers to grade at home.

Together, Pattie and Riley had elements of their personalities and teaching styles that reminded me of my cousin Elizabeth, who is Aunt Laveen's daughter. Elizabeth and I started teaching around the same time, after we both completed our master's degree programs. Elizabeth is a natural leader and works hard to develop relationships with parents, families, and students. She is welcoming, maternal, and dependable, like Pattie and Riley. As a classroom teacher, Elizabeth also had clear, high expectations for her students that she challenged them to reach. As an up-and-coming leader and current interim principal, Elizabeth has a contagious can-do attitude, much like Riley.

Much to my surprise, Jackie reminded me of myself. In addition to appearance, we shared introverted personalities and teaching styles. Soft-spoken yet firm, we both enacted care in our own way. Watching Jackie teach was like an out-of-body experience; over the years, I have often wondered how I appear as a teacher to others, especially as the majority of my colleagues in my building who receive attention and accolades are very energetic and gregarious. Through my observation, I felt like I gained self-confidence and self-acceptance in my own teaching style. And although I may not receive the endorsement of others in regards to my teaching efforts, I now find validation in being my authentic self.

Finally, Natalie reminded me of my mother, a retired business education teacher, and Mrs. Jefferson, the retired first grade teacher from my elementary school. Consequently, my mom and Mrs. Jefferson were my Girl Scout troop leaders my entire elementary school career. Like Natalie, they keep in contact with their former students and are extremely caring. Even to

this day, my mom tells me who she ran into while running errands, or childhood friends that I grew up with will inquire about her. All three of these women have sharp memories when it comes to details and histories of past students and are intentional about maintaining relationships, which is something that I am learning to do more with former students.

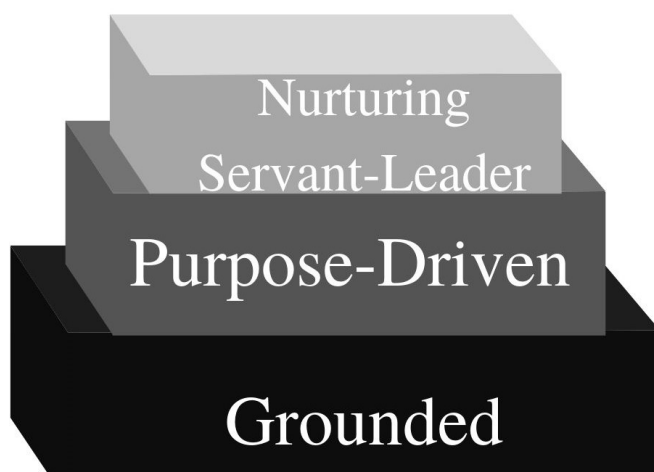
In addition to seeing how each woman was different, conducting the study helped to challenge my thinking in regards to what it means to be a female teacher of color in the suburbs. I often feel as though there is a stereotype that all Black women teachers are strict and no-nonsense, and that others have difficulty seeing past that. While all of the women in the study were able to assert themselves and have firm rules for their classes, they each had vulnerable, soft sides. I also feel as though there is a perception that teaching in the suburbs is easier than in an urban environment. However, in hearing individual stories, I found that these women have endured their own share of trials and tribulations, including health scares, discrimination, and unemployment. Although each experience was different, I agree with Collins (2000a) in that there was unity among Black women in the study of common challenges.

### **Summary of Findings**

The diverse, individual experiences of each woman in the study are reflective of Black feminist thought. From this framework, Collins (2000a) posits that although Black women have collective struggles, they are autonomous individuals who will each have unique experiences. Within this research context, each woman shared the struggle of either being the only or one of a few African American teachers in her district and/or building. When we met in the focus group, this appeared to be a connecting point as introductions were made, and as others could relate to stories that were being shared. However, in getting to know each person and reflect on her teaching style, I know that each person's perspective and history varied.

After analyzing the data, three major themes emerged—the suburban othermother is grounded, purpose-driven, and a nurturing servant-leader. It is important to note that although the women are connected by the three themes, there are variations of definitions, based on the conglomeration of subcategories within each theme. The theme “grounded” refers to the suburban othermother’s foundation and sense of security via spirituality, family, confidence, and self-care. Because she is secure in her calling to teach in a majority-White school, her motivation or sense of purpose emerges, from which the theme “purpose-driven” derives. Within her purpose is a desire to be an advocate and a role model, particularly to Black students. Finally, within the classroom and beyond, she acts as a “nurturing servant-leader,” through her ability to be relational, caring, and accepting. Her classroom is student-centered and she has a deep sense of responsibility for developing students, especially her African American students.

After analyzing these findings, a conceptual framework was designed to encapsulate the experience of the suburban othermother, as shown in Figure 9.



*Figure 9.* Conceptual framework. This diagram is used to model the identity, purpose, and essence of the suburban othermother.

“Grounded” is at the bottom, as it serves as the foundation of the othermother’s essence. Everything else about her grows and flourishes from being rooted in this base. “Purpose-driven”

is above it because her spirituality often influences her sense of purpose. Finally, the “nurturing servant-leader” is at the top; this position is what others often see and by which they identify her. She blossoms as a servant leader because she is passionate about her purpose to see through the well-being of all children, particularly African American children in suburban, majority-White environments. Further findings and examples about these themes will follow in more detail.

**Grounded.** First, the suburban othermother is grounded. She is grounded by exhibiting confidence and demanding respect from her students and colleagues, as Zoe and Jackie demonstrated through speech and interactions with others. As Zoe and I walked the halls of her school, she greeted students she knew and reminded them to speak to me as well. Jackie described in the focus group setting standards for how parents could address her and what she was not willing to tolerate. In other instances, being grounded means she is rooted in the community, such as Bonnie, Natalie, and Pattie who have lived in their suburbs for many years. Being grounded also comes in the form of having strong ties to her own family, such as Gerrie, who resolved to make her family a priority over her job by teaching her students how to grade their own work so that she could devote more time at home to her sons.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2005a) and Noddings (2010) wrote about the importance of caring for oneself in order to best care for others, and I saw this demonstrated by the women through spiritual practices, reducing stress, or increasing time with family. Despite her ability to give above and beyond, the suburban othermother values the practice of self-care. While the suburban othermother is a caring individual who serves others, she has come to a realization that she must take care of herself first in order to best meet the needs of others, as Jackie exhibited through self-care to manage her multiple sclerosis. To keep her stress level down, she would pray and remind herself to turn her cares about students over to God.

She is also a spiritual being who relies on religious tenets and practices to thrive in her field, as each woman indicated with different levels of faith. When asked about spirituality, each participant indicated that her faith and religious beliefs impacted their practice. Alston (2005) wrote that for Black female superintendents, “spirituality that grounds them as they contend with each day’s struggles” (p. 682). Likewise, I believe that the teachers in this study showed that the suburban othermother has spiritual roots that ground her, drive her practice, and give her the grace to serve each day. Just as Paris (1995) describes spirituality to encompass every aspect of life for African peoples and interconnect, the suburban othermother sees the work that she does as spiritual.

In this study, each woman had her own religious history and profession of faith. Some reflected on embedded teachings from childhood, such as Riley and Jackie. Gerrie used overarching themes to guide her life and educational practice. Other women described needing to connect to God each day, through prayer, meditation, or Scripture reading, such as Natalie, Bonnie, Pattie, Jackie, and Zoe. Most women in this project, like Bonnie, Pattie, Riley, Jackie, Zoe, and Natalie, felt that God had called them to their school and district and they were fulfilling His purpose for their lives. Being grounded, although it takes shape in different ways, is a foundation for the suburban othermother, as everything else that she does grows out of this position, as indicated in Figure 9. Having an influence of faith in her foundation provides her with a reason for teaching in the suburbs that extends beyond merely obtaining employment, to a place of responsibility and ownership, that leads to her purpose.

**Purpose-driven.** The suburban othermother is also purpose-driven. Her purpose in suburban education is connected to being grounded, especially in her religious beliefs. Since she is firmly planted in her identity not just as an educator, but as an African American woman, her

purpose is able to arise, lead, and guide her work. As Bonnie proudly stated, “I always say that God put me there for a reason, and to help ‘our’ kids. I mean our African American kids.”

Bonnie was not the only participant to refer to African American students as though they were her own; most of the other women did as well.

In a chapter about motherhood and othermothers, Collins (2000a) described this choice of fictive kinship language used by Black women: “The use of family language in referring to members of the African-American community also illustrates the socially responsible individualism of Black women’s community work.... Black women frequently use family language to describe Black children” (p. 190). Also, I think the choice to use this fictive kinship and family language reflects the suburban othermother’s responsibility within a majority-White school to advocate for African American children by using her position to speak on behalf of African American students and even be a watchful eye. Bonnie later elaborated that she initially wanted to work at her school so that she could keep an eye on her daughters and their friends. Advocacy came in other forms by the women, as Natalie served on a diversity council and Pattie spoke up for the needs of African American students in department meetings.

In addition to advocacy, the suburban othermother finds herself fulfilling this purpose as a role model to all students, but specifically to African American students. Jackie often reflected on her aunt’s words, “They need me here,” as a reminder to be a role model to her suburban students and build relationships with them beyond the subject of mathematics. Pattie was intentional about teaching her dance students, who happened to be primarily African American, how to self-advocate. She modeled appropriate language for them to use with adults to convey that they needed help, which is a form of code-switching. Bonnie had similar conversations with

the girls in her mentoring club, where Black girls could also receive guidance specific to their futures, in the form of what Thompson (2004) describes as political clarity.

Serving as a role model was translated by some women into racial pride and identity. The suburban othermother feels that it is important to be visible so that all races can see a person of color in her role, but also so that African American students can have someone to look up to. Natalie had a diverse book collection for her students and read a tale about a Chinese boy during my observation. Jackie showed ethnic pride by hosting a small dinner in her classroom, where students of all races had the opportunity to experience soul food. Bonnie was intentional about not only wearing her hair in natural styles, but also about incorporating Black hair care into her Economics lessons.

Racial uplift is described by Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1999) as a moral and spiritual responsibility that has been used historically by African American educators. I feel the way that the suburban othermothers advocated for Black students, code-switched, spoke with political clarity, and modeled racial pride in majority-White schools as part of their purpose served to uplift the race and also fueled agency. Collins (2000a) furthers Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (1999) claims by stating, "It is no accident that many well-known U.S. Black women activists were either teachers or somehow involved in struggling for educational opportunities for African-Americans of both sexes.... Working for racial uplift and education became intertwined" (p. 211). Through the years, Black women educators have used their purpose to be role models, advocates, and change agents, and the suburban othermothers in this study show that the trend continues to persist today.

**Nurturing servant-leader.** Finally, the desire to be a role model and advocate often grows into leadership positions for the suburban othermother. While the women were identified



early on by colleagues as leaders, through the course of the study, it appeared as though the participants were specifically servant-leaders. In this study, the suburban othermother serves because she is compelled by a responsibility to develop others, including students, parents, and staff. Both in and out of the classroom, she puts the needs of students first, hoping to provide care and acceptance through building relationships that often extend beyond the walls of the school building. The participant's ability to advocate could occur formally or informally depending on her level of leadership. While Pattie, Natalie, Bonnie, Riley, and Gerrie held formal leadership positions that were formally acknowledged by either the building administration, district, or region, Zoe and Jackie held informal positions of leadership. These leadership positions may or may not be recognized by her own district. In the case of Pattie, although she carried a huge leadership role for her region, the district did not acknowledge the fruit of her labor. Nonetheless, as a servant-leader, the suburban othermother is driven to lead because of being grounded and purpose-driven, and not for the recognition of others. Her leadership is connected to her spirituality.

In a study on African American female teachers employing care in schools, Bass (2009) writes:

Many events, personal and societal, continuously lead African Americans, and in this study, African American women, to seek the wisdom and direction of their Creator, or whomever they describe as a higher power. This Creator—this power—inevitably directs them to care—to care enough to generate great change around them. (p. 628)

The spirituality of Black female educators can lead to care work, as demonstrated with the suburban othermothers in this study. As each teacher put aside her own needs to fulfill her spiritual purpose, to educate students, a student-centered environment was created. All of the

participants were driven beyond their own feelings to care for others and be concerned for the development of students, as Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2005a) and Noddings (2010) have suggested. This looked like being accessible, as Gerrie described, with food or as a listening ear. Riley also was reachable and relatable throughout the school day and seemed approachable to all in her building. For Bonnie, developing students came in the form of leading a club, but also taking time to talk with students in need. Jackie, Natalie, Zoe, and Pattie were intentional about developing students through the relationships that were built both in and out of the classroom.

However, by giving to students and seeking to meet their needs, the women in this study created student-centered environments that were often culturally relevant. Natalie taught in a way that could connect to the various racial and ethnic groups represented in her classroom by having diverse materials. Pattie, for instance, had conversations with students unrelated to dance technique, and brought a community-minded approach to resolving conflict through the use of restorative practices. Although each room was student-centered, there were still order and high expectations. The participants in the study confidently stated and reinforced expectations for behavior and work completion. Ross et al. (2008) describe these traits as authoritative, insistent, and warm demanding. The authors describe "...the authoritative teacher as exhibiting personal power, earning respect rather than demanding it, setting standards and pushing students to meet them, and believing all students can learn.... In fact, insistence may be viewed as the teacher's expression of care" (pp. 143, 146). Ultimately, I feel each teacher in the study was driven by her purpose to care for all children and hold them to high standards, while simultaneously looking out specifically for the interests of and advocating for the needs of African American students.

## Research Conclusions

The conceptual framework of suburban othermothering can also be used as a guide when answering the research questions. The ability to be grounded, purpose-driven, and a nurturing servant-leader not only encapsulates the themes from this study, but also helps to provide clarity to the questions, along with connections to the literature. The three research questions *What is the experience of the suburban othermother? What is her essence? How does she see herself and her responsibility to her community?* will be answered using the conceptual framework in combination with the literature.

**What is the experience of the suburban othermother?** Collins (2000a) writes that within Black feminist thought, Black women can have diverse responses in a collective struggle or experience. I believe the findings indicated that although each woman in this study had a different experience as an educator; they were all united in the journey of being Black women employed in majority-White, suburban school districts. Furthermore, in order to qualify as a participant for research, they had to hold a sense of stature or respect, as measured by leadership roles or positions of authority, as indicated by Bass (2012), Dixson (2003), Loder (2005), Morris (1999), and Noblit (1993). More specifically, these women were found to embody a particular vein of leadership—servant leadership, described by Alston (2005), Elmore (2001), and Northouse (2016). As previously mentioned, while each individual held some sort of leadership role and/or authority, it varied from participant to participant. Some women held formal leadership roles and others held informal leadership positions. Additionally, while some were in formal leadership roles, they were not always acknowledged or valued by the participant's home district, as was the case with Pattie.

Even though it can be stated that the experience of the suburban othermother can be one of leadership and authority, there is variance in the boundaries of that position. All of the participants, at some point in their career, carried stature in regards to both informal and formal leadership and authority. However, those positions of power were not always formally recognized, as in the case of Pattie and Jackie, who chose to invest their efforts elsewhere other than formal leadership roles within their district. Additionally, many of the teachers chose to exercise their stature among other Black families in the community, such as Natalie and Bonnie, who both lived in the suburbs in which they taught and had personal ties to the Black Parent Organizations.

hooks (1986b) writes that within Black communities, Black women's voices have been heard but not always listened to and recognized by the masses as significant, which I see as a form of silencing. In thinking about the recognition of suburban othermothers as leaders, or lack thereof, I also see administrators' failure to acknowledge the community work of Black female educators as leadership a manner of silencing and a microaggression. Mainstream society and White school administrators within suburban contexts may not readily identify some of these women as leaders because some do not hold formal positions of leadership. However, they are each leaders in their own right; it is imperative that school personnel expand their ideals of leadership and authority, including both formal and informal roles.

In addition, the leadership experience of each woman occurred as a result of being grounded and purpose-driven, as the conceptual framework indicates. The suburban othermother would not be placed where she was, as a leader in a suburban school district, without fulfilling a purpose as granted to her from a Higher Power. Her ability to lead, thrive, and flourish in the environment is because of her spiritual connection and her sense of agency, which ultimately

connects to her essence. Paris (1995) writes that the spirituality of African and African American peoples is interdependent, that God rules supreme in an individual's life, and all things connect to God. I find this philosophy is evident in the life and work of the suburban othermother.

**What is her essence?** Above all, the suburban othermother is grounded through spiritual ties. Not only is she ruled by the spiritual tenets of African and African American peoples, which Paris (1995) states, but also the history and lineage of the Black church, which Collins (2000a) describes. Her essence, or being, is based in her relationship with God, which helps to stabilize and center her, particularly as an African American educator in a majority White work environment. This act of choosing to stay employed, despite racism and oppression, is an example of what Paris (1995) describes as the African virtue of forbearance. Paris says, "the simple act of waiting may be the best of all possible strategies. Doing what is necessary to preserve life under caustic conditions need not be viewed as either mindless submission or cowardice but, instead, as intelligent action" (p. 141). Bonnie had to endure racist administration, but through her faith in God and ability to assert herself, she remained employed and gained the respect of her superintendent. I believe the suburban othermother chooses not only to stay employed in such an environment, but to establish roots and thrive because she feels that God has called her to her building for a specific purpose.

As Bass (2009) indicates, spirituality impacts the suburban othermother's practice, guiding her interactions with colleagues, students, and families. Zoe, Pattie, Riley, and Bonnie voiced clear expectations as to what would be acceptable interactions with colleagues, which can be attributed to confidence. Jackie informed administrators and families as to what type of rhetoric she would tolerate and removed herself from situations that were bigoted. Riley's

confidence exuded so much that the students desired to have her advise a confidence club, where they could learn how to be confident. All of the teachers in the study were confidently grounded in the expectations for students as well, which Case (1997) describes as othermothers holding high expectations.

The way the women interacted with students allowed them to be seen as nurturing individuals—caring, relational, and accepting. While her ability to care may have been drawn upon more by African American students and other students of color, she employs care to all. Collins (2000a) writes, “Black women have long had the support of the Black church, an institution with deep roots in the African past and a philosophy that accepts and encourages expressiveness and an ethic of caring” (p. 264). To me, this means that the influence of the Black church and the spirituality of Black female teachers will lead them to care. Gerrie felt her ability to care was a result of her spiritual tenets. Natalie and Bonnie wanted to be remembered as individuals who cared. Jackie, Pattie, Riley, and Zoe found ways to connect with students through extracurricular activities, conversations, and/or notes, and developed lasting relationships with students. It can also be said of the suburban othermother that her ability to care is not limited to students who share the same race, but extends to all who are present in her classroom, building, and community.

**How does she see herself and her responsibility to her community?** While the suburban othermother is nurturing and caring to all students, her purpose as an educator is connected to her racial identity as an African American. Additionally, her identity and purpose are in the middle of the conceptual framework, showing how her ability both to be grounded as well as to nurture and lead are connected and interdependent, representative of the interdependence of African social ethics, as stated by Paris (1995). Because the suburban

othermother is secure in who she is, despite being a minority in her working environment, she feels empowered to be a role model and advocate of African American children and families.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1999) and Collins (2000a) further describe this work as agency.

The suburban othermother sees herself as a role model to all, yet at the same time, specifically to African American students. As Zoe, Gerrie, Jackie, and many others indicated, they felt it was important for people of all races to see that African American women can be successful, caring educators. The ability to nurture and care was recognized by students of all backgrounds; in Gerrie's school, her maternal instincts that impacted her practice led all students to refer to her as "Mama Smith." In a field that Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) report as dominated primarily by White, middle-class women, the suburban othermothers felt their visibility in the field was vital. Furthermore, as role models to African American students, the suburban othermothers were compelled to show students how to conduct themselves and what they could aspire to become. Pattie did this through teaching life skills to a primarily African American dance company. Bonnie advised and mentored students in her club for African American females.

To the community, the suburban othermother feels responsible to act as an advocate for African American children and families. For some, it may come easy if they live in the community and/or their children have attended school in the system, such as with Bonnie, Pattie, Natalie, and Gerrie. Being part of the system allows for ease of access to materials, as Natalie experienced in creating the Black Parent Organization. It also establishes credibility, as both Bonnie and Natalie experienced having the ear of central office administrators. However, living in the community was not a requirement to advocate for students of color.

During the study, each participant indicated at one point or another that they chose to be where they were because they felt needed. They felt as though they needed to be present as a role model and advocate. This meant being a positive African American figure and keeping a watchful eye on other students of color in the building. This also looked like mediating conflict between African American families and staff members, as Natalie was often called in to do. Whether they came to their school through convenience, happenstance, recruitment, or planning, each suburban othermother knew it was not an accident, but a divinely orchestrated assignment to nurture and lead others as well as be a role model and advocate for African American students and families. As Paris (1995) asserts, God is in every facet of life for African and African American peoples, and I believe the suburban othermothers embodied this as they worked through the community, on behalf of African American children.

### **Significance of the Research/Implications of the Study**

At the beginning of this study, Barrax's (1967) "Black Narcissus" poem was used to introduce the experiences of students of color, particularly African American students, in suburban school settings. From this perspective, the piece has a hopeless tone, as though minority students will always be misunderstood, marginalized, and expected to conform to White, middle-class standards. However, given the theoretical frameworks of Black feminism, womanism, and Black feminist care, along with the data from this study, the poem holds new meaning and greater significance, pertaining to the work of Black female educators in majority-White school districts. Specifically, it, along with the research, speaks to valuing Black female teachers, needing to recruit and retain them, and honoring them as leaders. As a Black female educator myself, there are also personal implications of the study.



**The value of Black female teachers.** The suburban othermother knows what it feels like to be marginalized, like the African American students she teaches. Yet, because she is grounded in confidence, spiritually sound, and rooted in relationship to others, she can flourish and develop agency for the Black students in her realm of influence. The women in this study show not only how they thrive in environments that expect them to assimilate, but also their commitment to racial uplift and leadership as role models and advocates for Black students. The suburban othermothers in this study find pride in their African American identity because they know it is a gift, not a burden, that can never be taken away. Just as the subject of “Black Narcissus” laughs at the end of the piece because he is still Black, the suburban othermother finds joy in being Black, and enjoys instilling pride and self-love into other African American students, like with Bonnie’s mentoring program for Black girls or the relationships that Zoe built with the Black twin girls at her school. Bonnie also showed joy in her identity by purposely wearing her hair in natural styles. “Black Narcissus” becomes full of hope when centered on the experiences of Black female teachers; the suburban othermother uses racial uplift and political clarity to provide hope, pride, and joy that help students reach their full potential, instead of seeing their identity as a burden.

The preface to this study stated that this piece is written by a Black woman, about Black women, for Black women. That being said, while many of the characteristics of the featured suburban othermothers can be emulated by educators of all races and ethnicities—such as creating a warm classroom environment, developing a rapport with students and families, and even advocating for students of color—only a Black female educator holds the African American lineage, essence, and lived experience of relying on multiple identities that intersect. Only a Black female teacher can impart care based on those traits and have the depth of understanding

of why she is choosing to care with political clarity and be driven to uplift the race. It would be easy to say that any educator could simply take the outward characteristics of the suburban othermother and use them as a quick fix in the classroom to manage behavior or increase student achievement among students of color, specifically Black students. However, only a Black female teacher can have African and African American ethics passed down to her and permeate her epistemology and pedagogy.

This study shows us that Black women are doing many positive and impactful things within the African American community, and even beyond, in suburban settings. Paris (1995) writes that the community and the contributions one makes within it are divine. I believe the work of the suburban othermother and her work to advocate for African American students in majority-White settings are of great value and divine as well. The stories of the suburban othermother are important, but so are their contributions as advocates, role models, and leaders. In thinking about some of the prevailing problems in education, such as the achievement gap, this study sheds light on the resources that a Black female educator can provide. The way students are educated, assessed, and even disciplined could look completely different from a communal system, where each aspect of the school is dependent upon the other. In the spirit of Black feminist and womanist tradition, it is time to put Black women at the center and listen to our voices, in order to provide sustainable solutions within the realm of education. Most importantly, I think that doing so will show that Black women are valued in the classroom, even in environments where they are a minority, like the majority-White school districts in which the teachers of this study were employed.

**Recruit and retain Black female teachers.** This research is also significant as it serves as a clarion call for the recruitment and retention of Black female educators, particularly in

suburban school districts. Researchers Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) and Ingersoll and May (2016) describe the decline of African American educators and also a dearth within suburban communities. As the teaching field progresses, suburban districts need to create partnerships with institutions that have a larger enrollment of African American women in their schools of education. This also looks like partnering with historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and creating pipelines for Black female teaching candidates. Furthermore, once hired into suburban districts, measures must be created to retain African American female teachers. Black feminist care (BFC) can be used to develop a model for teacher retention by caring for the whole person, political clarity, and creating a support system of othermothers and sisterfriends.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2005) and Collins (2000a) write about how Black women have often been falsely stereotyped as super-strong, selfless, and almost superhuman; in reality, Black women need to be recognized for having multiple identities, uplifted by others and encouraged to make time for self-care. For example, because Natalie had a heart condition, her coworkers were intentional about supporting her and monitoring her vitals during the field day. Instead of playing into the superhuman stereotype, they encouraged her to take time for herself. Additionally, through the years, Natalie adjusted the amount of responsibilities she had, and even let some things go, like the Black Parent Organization, in order to make her health a priority. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) writes the following about Black women:

As they recognize their vulnerability and insist on their shared humanity with others, Black women articulate that they—their minds, bodies, emotional and physical health, and dreams—matter. Consequently, rather than strength, wellness and self-care become cornerstones of their existence. (p. 150)

I believe that in order to retain Black women teachers, the work of self-care has to be a community effort. Not only does this become the responsibility of an individual to make sure they have a solid well-being but is dependent upon the school community in which the Black woman is employed. Again, there is a need for a model of interdependence that Paris (1995) describes within African social ethics to occur within schools to create vitality, among not only students but staff as well.

Additionally, there is a need for mentoring, or a regional, intergenerational support system comprised of Black female educators, as Lindsay-Dennis (2015) and Phillips and McCaskill (1995) describe. At the end of this study, one participant, Zoe, was so impacted that she began working with the county's diversity specialist to create a support group for other Black female educators. As shown through the focus group in this study, Black women need a space where they can speak freely and confidentially about what Collins (2000a) and Crenshaw (1989) describe as their intersectional lived experiences. In "Black Narcissus," Barrax (1967) begins the second stanza with "I want your right to be yourself" (p. 203). In considering the retention of Black female teachers, I feel that support systems and groups can give Black women a means to fully be themselves and embrace their reality as minority teachers, particularly in suburban school systems. This could come through the support group that Zoe is working towards, or other means, such as an online community or a professional organization. I believe that since there are Black women who are dealing with the experience of teaching in majority-White school districts, there is a need to network and have a safe space for their voice to be heard.

**Honor and respect Black female teachers as servant-leaders.** In analyzing the responsibility of the othermother and her role in the community, Black female teachers as leaders are vital, necessary components to suburban school systems. In Black communities, the role of

the othermother, along with motherhood in general, is a respected position of power. Collins writes:

Motherhood—whether bloodmother, othermother, or community othermother—can be invoked as a symbol of power by African-American women engaged in Black women’s community work.... Some of the most highly respected Black women in working-class Black neighborhoods are those who demonstrate an ethic of community service. (p. 192)

I believe this study serves as a model for the ways Black women can lead, whether formally or informally, and also shows that Black women do indeed have power. The myth of Narcissus reminds us that many of us live a life of untapped power and potential because we are held back by others; likewise, this study leads me to believe that many Black female teachers in the suburbs have power as leaders that may be honored by Black communities, but go unnoticed by their overarching school districts. While many women in the study held formal positions as extracurricular advisors, managed parent groups, or held regional leadership positions, they each served informally as leaders to the African American families within their school districts. The bonds that Pattie, Natalie, and Bonnie created with African American families through their tenure and residence in the community led them to be esteemed by Black families. It then becomes the responsibility of administrators to recognize this power and allow it to be used more broadly throughout school systems.

Furthermore, this research shows that Black female educators in the suburbs need to be both seen and heard as servant leaders. Alston (2005) writes about Black female educational leaders:

These women not only have a strong sense of efficacy, but they are empowered and are deeply caring about their mission—to serve, lead, and educate children. In addition,

many of these women have an unyielding faith and sense of spirituality that enables them to always strive towards excellence. (p. 682)

Not only do they need to be visibly recognized, but I believe Black female teachers need to be honored and respected by their school community as a whole, for their leadership style brings a strength to the institution as a whole. For example, Pattie has great regional stature, but her leadership abilities are underappreciated by her district. It would be better if her district would invest in her abilities, as did Riley's and Gerrie's districts, and give her room to lead. Instead of having a Black female educator on staff for the pretense of valuing diversity, as Natalie experienced through her district's perfunctory diversity council, truly invest in and promote these women. Let them know that they are valued and allow them to lead in the ways they know best. I believe that administrators need to find ways to honor and respect Black women as leaders, whether they are in formal or informal leadership.

**Personal implications as a Black female teacher.** It was not until I reached the end of my data analysis that I realized the implications of this study on my own life and practice. In conversations about Black women or race in education, where I am typically quiet and reserved, I have found myself speaking up more. Where I have struggled to find words before, I find my research practices now giving me voice and, more importantly, courage. For years I have worked in a toxic environment, but have stayed under the radar, in hopes of keeping my job and not wanting to make waves. By the time I was concluding this study, I found myself at the doctor, because the years of mismanaged stress and silence were negatively impacting my body. At first, I remained in shock, but after taking some time to let my body heal, I realized that I needed to do exactly what the data showed. If I wanted to grow as an educator and as a future othermother, I was going to have to start making myself a priority through self-care.

Before I made arrangements for self-care, I found myself penning a letter to my administrators, to release the hurt, disappointment, and silencing that I have endured over the years as a Black female educator in a majority-White school and district. Then, I took it a step further; with the confidence I gained from the women in this study, I read the letter aloud to my principal and assistant principal. My hands and voice shook as I brought life to the words, and when I finished, I lifted my head to see my principal sitting there, dumbfounded and at a loss for words. In those moments, I realized that as the poem reads, “I am still black” (Barrax, 1967, p. 203), and that I could no longer try to hide who I was or conform, I found the courage to fully be myself. This research opportunity filled me with courage I have never had before and gave me the strength I needed to be grounded.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations occurred within the sample size. Seven participants participated in this study, which helped to fill this relatively brief research project and allow for reinforcement of ideas. However, as the study demonstrates the multiplicity of Black women, experiences, and thoughts, there may be additional viewpoints and perspectives that are yet to be uncovered. A larger sample size may unearth an increase of findings.

Additionally, the participants in this study were granted confidentiality through a pseudonym but not granted anonymity. Because there are some qualifiers that make it easy to detect an identity, some participants asked for certain parts of their stories to be withheld. They felt that including controversial parts of their experience would put their job security at-risk. Therefore, some data were not included, which also limits the study.

### Suggestions for Future Research

When looking at Black education from a historical context, one must consider education before and after *Brown v. Board of Education*. As stated in the first chapter, after the desegregation of schools, many Black educators became unemployed (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Collins, 2009; Ford & Sassi, 2014; hooks, 1994). An area of future research should be a historical study of Black females in suburban education from the beginning of school desegregation until now. This study should also provide historical statistics of school staffing demographics in suburban districts over time. The study should also address how suburban othermothering has occurred historically.

Within Black feminist care, othermothering is connected to respect for the whole person and political clarity. This study focuses solely on the role of othermothering in the suburban context, the identity of the suburban othermother, and her responsibilities and contributions to the community at-large. Future research could center around the other aspects of BFC—respect for the whole person and political clarity in suburban contexts. Although these topics were touched upon during this study, they were not the main focus.

Furthermore, within Black feminism and womanism, Black women are multidimensional and can have unique, individual experiences. There is room for varying perspectives, identities, and sensemaking among Black women, yet simultaneously, there are commonalities within the culture that help to unite them to one another. As individuals, it is important to note that not every Black female educator will hold the traits of an othermother. This study showed that there is more to being a classroom othermother than being a mature, Black female educator. Future research could explore the relationship and interactions of Black female educators as a whole,



particularly the ways that othermothers and non-othermothers function together in a school setting, and the different strengths they each bring to the community.

Additionally, womanism not only examines race and gender, as was the heavy focus of this study, but also class. This study pulled on tenets from both Black feminism and womanism, and while class was examined to some degree, there is room for more research in this area. The women in this study came from middle-class backgrounds, which leaves room for future research regarding the experiences of othermothers of other class groups. Future studies could place a heavier emphasis on the role of class within suburban othermothering, including how class differences shape perspectives, values, and interactions of Black female educators. Research could also investigate the intersections of intra-racial and cross-class interactions between Black female educators in suburban schools, along with their interactions and relationships with colleagues, students, and families of varying class distinctions.

Religion is another topic that could use further exploration in this study. While these suburban othermothers were either devout Christians or based their lives on Judeo-Christian values, there is more to be explored within the relationship between religion and suburban othermothering. As the sample size was not reflective of every Black female educator, it would be worth studying the connection between Christianity and suburban othermothering, along with exploring the experiences of othermothers who are of other religions, humanist, or do not have a particular religious affiliation.

Case (1997) and Collins (2000a) characterize othermothering as something that is established over time, as a woman gains roots within the community. The majority of the women in this study had been in their districts for a significant amount of time, and had gained the respect of their colleagues, community or both. Future research should explore how, when,

and why this respect was granted, through a longitudinal study. It would be highly informative to follow a suburban Black female educator as she rises from what Case (1997), Collins (2000a), and Lindsay-Dennis et al. (2011) describe as “sisterfriend” to “othermother.”

Finally, the research in this study is teacher-centered. It is focused on the experience of the suburban othermother and leaves little room for student voice. Future studies should also focus on the impact of the suburban othermother, from the perspective of students as well as their families. When considering the weight and importance of the role of the suburban othermother, it is imperative to also understand the impact of this individual, not only on students and their families but also on student achievement. There is more to what meets the eye when exploring the totality of the suburban othermother.

### **Concluding Self-Narrative**

This school year marks my 11th year in education. Now, more than ever, I find myself running into former students—at baseball games, at the mall, or in a restaurant. Most names I remember quickly, others come to mind after silently praying that God would bring the name to my remembrance. I find myself taking after Mrs. Jefferson, my mother, and other former teachers I admire by trying to remember details of students’ lives and keep in contact with students. More and more students in my building are now the children or relatives of friends with whom I grew up. While setting up my classroom this summer, I had a reunion with several individuals, including one of my middle school classmates, whose daughter was enrolling in my school as a sixth grader. I find myself being more intentional about looking out for African American students, even if they have not entered my classroom before, and communicating to parents that I am here for them.

During the fall of my eighth year of teaching, I stopped by my local grocery store after a weeknight church service. I live and shop in the same suburb where I teach, so it is common to run into students and families while out and about. On my way out, I bumped into a father of a former student of mine. We hugged and got caught up on life; I let him know I was working on my Ed.D. and he wanted to know if I planned to still be in the district by the time his youngest daughter would be in seventh grade. I then inquired about my former student, and with a solemn face, he said, “Things aren’t going well, Ms. Hughes...they aren’t well. Please call my wife when you get a chance.”

As I exited the grocery store, mostly worried about what could be going on with my former student, I realized within the span of eight years I had grown in stature as an educator. No longer was I a brand-new, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed first year teacher, but I was someone who had proven to become a pillar in the community, whom individuals could rely on to truly care for the well-being of their children. I had a history of going above and beyond, being approachable, and getting results, and that encounter proved it. Looking back on that situation, I feel as though I have grown even more, in such a short amount of time. With each school year, I find my roots in the community growing longer and stronger. When I pushed my shopping cart to my car through the dark parking lot that evening, I felt myself walking in the shoes of Mrs. Jefferson and all the othermothers who paved the way for me. I still feel that way, and to this day, I find myself slowly rising from a sisterfriend and becoming a suburban othermother.

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## Appendix A

### Informed Consent Form

Black Narcissus: The Role of the Suburban Othermother

Dear Participant:

This letter serves as an invitation to participate in a research study that will explore the lived experiences of African American female teachers and their African American students in the suburban context. You have been selected because you are an African American female teacher over the age of 40 who has established herself in the community. You may decide not to participate. Information about the study is provided below to help you make an informed decision regarding your participation. Feel free to ask any questions.

**Project:** Black Narcissus: The Role of the Suburban Othermother

**Purpose:** This study will explore the lived experiences of African American female teachers in the suburban context.

**Procedures:** You will be asked to participate in an interview that will last no longer than an hour and a half in a location of your choosing. The interview will be audio recorded and later transcribed in confidentiality. You will also be shadowed in your classroom for an entire day, and then have a follow-up discussion; the discussion will also be audio recorded and transcribed. Finally, you will be asked to participate in a focus group with other participants, which will also audio recorded and transcribed.

**Risks and/or Discomforts:** There are no known risks, however, some discomfort may be experienced if you choose share information that may be personal. You may also experience discomfort through being shadowed and allowing another adult in the classroom. As a research participant, you will have no privacy when being shadowed, which may lead to discomfort.

**Benefits:** The information gained from this study may help us to better understand African American female teachers in the suburban context.

**Confidentiality:** You will be assigned a pseudonym which will be attached to you during all purposes of the study.

**Compensation:** You will receive a gift card.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:** You may ask any questions during any time in this study. You may contact Kelli Hughes via phone, (248) 943-5254 or email, [hugheska@umich.edu](mailto:hugheska@umich.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or want to report any concerns, you may contact the University of Michigan -- Dearborn Institutional Review Board, (313) 593-5468.

**Freedom to Withdraw:** You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without consequence.

**Consent:** If you choose to participate in this study, you will be interviewed, shadowed and participate in a focus group.

Your participation in this research study is a voluntary decision. Your signature certifies this decision and that you understood the presented information. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

---

Signature of Participant

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Date

I hereby give consent to audio record my interview.

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Initials of Participant

---

Date

I give consent for the participant to be shadowed in the district.

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Signature of District Admin

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Date

I give consent for the participant to be shadowed in the school building.

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Signature of Building Admin

---

Date

In my judgement, I give consent voluntarily and knowingly. I possess the legal capacity to give informed consent for participation in this research study.

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Signature of Investigator

---

Date

Kelli Hughes, MLIS

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol—Initial Interview

Thank you for participating in this interview. As you know, I'm going to audio record this so that I can be sure to have an accurate record of your responses. Also, you have the right to refuse to answer any questions if you feel that something is too personal. And, you have the right to end this interview at any time. There are no consequences to you if you do decline a question or decide to end the session. Do you have any questions before we get started? [Take the time to answer any questions.] Do you agree to be audio-recorded during this interview? [If the response is yes, then proceed; if the response is no, then thank the student and end the process.] Ready?

1. Can you tell me about your educational career/history? How did you get where you are today?
2. How would you describe your interactions with parents and families?  
How would you describe your role in the community?
3. How would you define care? What does it mean to show care to students?  
Do you feel that you show care? If so, how?
4. What does leadership and authority look like in a school? What types of formal leadership are present in your school? What types of informal leadership are present in your school? Where do you see yourself in these positions of formal/informal leadership & authority?

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol – Focus Group

Good Morning, and thank you for participating in our focus group. I really appreciate you taking time to be a part of my study. As you know, I have been conducting my dissertation research on the lived experiences of African American female teachers in majority-White suburban school districts and how they show care. As a fellow teacher, I am reflecting upon my own experiences as I study yours.

Over the summer, I reflected upon the shadowing I did in your classrooms and the interviews we had, and looked for commonalities. I have about four general themes and question sets to drive our conversation today, and I expect for us to be here for about two hours.

There are no wrong answers to the questions, and it's ok to share experiences/opinions that differ from one another. It is ok to respond to one another or follow up with examples, agreements or disagreements. Please share openly and honestly and have a conversation with each other. I am here to ask questions, listen and make sure everyone has a chance to share. I am interested in hearing from everyone, so if you're talking a lot, I may ask you to give others a chance. If you aren't saying much, I may call on you. I just want to make sure all of you have a chance to share your ideas.

Pseudonyms will be used, and if possible, please use pseudonyms when referring back to another participant. This session is recorded so that I can transcribe it and catch all of your comments.

If you have a cell phone, please put it on silent, and if you need to answer, please step out to do so. Feel free to get up and get more refreshments if you like. The restrooms are across the hall and to the right.

Let's get started. How about we go around and tell our district, years in education and subject/grade taught.

1. Leadership recap
  - a. How do you define leadership?
  - b. Describe leadership as an African American woman in your building.
  - c. Are you an informal or formal leader? How?
  - d. Describe value of leadership between district and professional world.
2. Respect
  - a. Define respect.
  - b. Do you feel respected by (students, district, parents)? Why or why not?
  - c. What makes you feel respected?
  - d. Define respect.
  - e. How has respect changed for you over the years?
3. Purpose
  - a. Why are you employed where you are?
  - b. Why do you stay?
4. Self-care
  - a. Define self-care.
5. What do you want to be remembered for? Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
6. Is there anything I haven't asked that you want to know?